



Ms. Stein

or

The Postmodern Prometheus

GARDNER RICH

". . . and therefore the end of the book must be more replete with lewd lore than the first chapters."

Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*"

Part One : Late Spring

Chapter 1

It was like Robert all over again, a nice guy but a premature ejaculator. He had had some idea it could be "Rob & Roz" during holidays, with greetings to all on the list, a loft downtown, poetry nights with a simpatico circle of close-readers, two kids, and a fish bowl. No surprise then, that he resigned after she dropped him. He hadn't really seen her either, although he had written a weird retro-sonnet, a piece of descriptive puff beginning *Who is Rosalva? What is she?*

Really now. The irony was palpable, especially considering that his magnum opus was to have been a refutation of Kronhauer's classic, *Masques of Ambiguity*. And the spy novel he was trying to write. It was the first thing Robert had shown her after sex, the bed clothes pulled snug under his cleft chin as he confided his exasperation. He wanted the opening to have immediate impact and intrigue, and after three years he had only a paragraph, like some character in Camus. He showed it to her because, he said, it was the most private part of himself, and he wanted their relationship to be open and honest. Although her professor, he was only human, after all. What a lark. He had even convinced himself it was a bad case of writer's block. In moments of boredom with her dissertation, she had read it for relief so often it was memorized:

Agent Michelina never noticed the microphone in the formica. She laid aside his inlaid balalaika, fretfully folded his worn balaclava, then bit into a buttered baklava made fresh that morning. Why, she mused, munching meditatively, was this happening to her? Moreover, had Laszlo's last transmission gone astray? In her bones she knew it had to be that strung-out operative in Odessa, the cad who had a word for it. "Snafu" she breathed between clenched teeth.

Luckily, she had sorted Robert early, and he was not on the committee. Not for her the ranks of the bungled and the botched. Roz had no intention of enlisting now. Besides, he was history, so why give it any time? She had to stay centered. She had to focus on the matter at hand, and that was Dr. Thelma, not drift on the tide of some reverie. O the mind, and other seas.

If the crone couldn't get along and wanted out, it was all to the better. Hortense Thelema was forever *the student* of a student of *Saussure*, as if that meant anything nigh onto twenty years after the barricades in Paris. A ridiculous woman and easily expendable so *c'est la vie*, thought Roz. Through careful planning she had seen that there were six members remaining where only four were required, anyway. It was her committee, and she had left nothing to chance.

It was not that her associates were fools, exactly, so much as under-achievers, not doing what is necessary, then acting as if they did not know the bottom line. They received few grants. They published infrequently. Wandering in a fogged maze, they forever argued footnotes. They did not see that she had made a sharp turn and taken the torch with her.

It was coming to a close and tonight was the night. A new checked linen covered her oaken table, expanded by a leaf and a borrowed chair to make seven places in all, with the head reserved for Dr. Biederbeck Tzara, her devoted mentor. Two years into her program, he had retired to become professor *emeritus*, but he had conducted a seminar each semester since, so to act as chair-of-committee for his final doctoral candidate. In return, she had become his protégé and confidante. She smoothed the napkin where he would sit. She gave the table a final glance

and adjusted the candles. The pinot grigio would not be room temperature, but slightly chilled, as he liked it. This small concession was of no consequence, for there was satisfaction in knowing she would finish a year ahead of schedule. For four years, every detail of every maneuver had gone according to plan. Tonight would begin the final phase.

It was necessary now for everyone to meet. Then the committee would return to their respective campuses, perhaps not meeting again until another conference years down the road. One day soon, she knew, she would write about those passed along the way.

Roz could not suppress a small smile. She had chosen well. The State's system, with its integrated campuses and five-year plans, with its former radicals in tenured positions, was the theater in which she was born to operate, after all. It was worth two years modeling to establish residency for in-state tuition, especially considering the contacts she had made. Besides, she had needed money. Then, too, some had doubted her determination, which had been half the reason for doing research in Guadalajara. As it worked out, that had not been wasted either. Her first freelance assignment had led to her first publication; and that had led to her thesis. After that, it was pure synergy. From Guadalajara forward, she had made everything work together. It had been the turning point. It had brought everything into focus and determined her direction.

So long had she hidden the objective from others that she rarely showed it even to herself. It was the lens turned upon the optometrists, although her dissertation's abstract did not express it this way. It could not, if it were to survive the committee. No, the dissertation was preliminary to what would soon follow in journals and books.

First tonight's dinner, then orals tomorrow morning, then over the summer final readings-through followed by signatures. One, two, three, and she would have her doctorate of philosophy in cultural studies. At the last moment, she would make excuses for not attending the ceremony in December, followed by increasingly sporadic exchanges over the universities' communications network -- and then... without further ado, *adieu*. She would have moved on. The thought was delicious, like the pleasure of driving someone to crisis. Craft and control.

Bzz-bzzzzzz.

A loud buzz from the intercom startled her back into the moment. Maybe she was a bit jumpy, after all. She went to the door, took a deep breath and pushed the button. "Bix?"

"Hi, Roz. Had to arrange for a van," said a scratchy voice she recognized as Dr. Tzara. "By now I'm sure you've guessed, we've made it and we're downstairs."

"Great. The door's open." She pushed the button for disengaging the lock, counted to five, then released. She glanced into a mirror by the intercom and quickly decided a stray strand would work well. She arranged her hair carefully, all the while checking the line of her lipstick. Perfect. She strode over to the disk player and selected continuous play. The selections ranged in mood from *Un Ballo in Maschera* to Miles Davis's *Masquelero*. She liked her private jokes.

There came a herd-like plod of footsteps in the corridor. At just the precise moment, she flipped the deadbolt and swung the door wide.

"It's showtime," she smiled, but everyone was wet and preoccupied with unfastening buttons. They were also discussing some writer, without complete accord.

"A bit of damp," said one of two older women, by way of explanation. It was Dr. Guelph.

Roz regrouped: "Don't tell me it's raining? Please, come-in. So you've all met, finally."

"Yes, introductions would be redundant," smiled a fortyish man, elegantly extending a long hand. As professor of cultural anthropology at the Northwood campus, Dr. Nick Ropoliz

was cautiously engaging. As he was one of very few men with no overt attraction to her, Roz regarded him and his formidable reputation as challenges to be met.

"Hello again, Nick."

"Rosalva..." He shook her hand.

"Of course, we've met," said Tzara. "We've been putting faces to names..."

"While huddling under an umbrella," Dr. Barnett Neale interrupted. Wearing bifocal horned rims and a wet tweed jacket with a briar pipe in the lapel pocket, he looked the part for conducting dry lectures on medieval literature in general and Icelandic sagas in particular.

"Huddling? Scurrying is more like it." Liana Ghibelline could sound simultaneously forbearing and testy even in electronic mail. She was professor of literature at the Sunnyvale campus, the longest of past commutes. Roz had taken Ghibelline's seminar discussing Derrida and deconstruction. "No place to park in front of your building."

"Well at least the driver had this," observed Tzara absent-mindedly, shaking water off the umbrella. "Even if it is frayed along the seam. Unseasonal weather."

"The driver?" Roz asked. "You didn't leave him..."

"*Her*," cackled Ghibelline. "Of all my students to make an assumption about jobs and gender. Really, Roz, you should do better."

"She's got you there, Rosalva" said Dr. Ropoliz suavely. He never used her nickname.

"*Touche'*," nodded Roz. She began hanging coats from the halltree next the mirror. In the reflection she glimpsed a current lover, standing just behind. "Oh, Dr. Randolph. How silly not to see you."

"I was beginning to feel neglected."

"Now don't you be silly, too" she said playfully. Roz was suddenly aware of the music, and that she had forgot the third disk. It was *The Police*, and not what she wanted to hear now.

*I have only come here seeking knowledge
Things they would not teach me of in college*

Dr. Tzara bussed Roz on the cheek, then fumbled in his coat pocket. "Good to see you, Roz. No, she's having coffee around the corner. Her pager's here somewhere."

"Whose pager?" With an effort, Roz reached for a button to change the music.

"Why the driver's, of course."

"Ah," said Roz. "Please, make yourselves comfortable everyone."

The professors began to sort who would sit where, based on a comparative calculus of maladies and sore joints.

"So here we are at last, in the doctoral candidate's digs. Nice place. I see she appreciates Archimboldo and Magritte." Warren Randolph III gestured toward two newly framed prints. He had not seen them on his last weekend visit, nearly a month ago. "Then you saw the exhibition at the museum?"

Roz ignored the question and determined to play host. "Sherry, everyone?" She reached deftly for short-stemmed crystal borrowed from her sister.

"Please."

"Yes, that would be lovely," nodded Guelph.

"Amazing this committee can work together without meeting, don't you think?"

"And so well..."

"Such is technology these days," said Tzara. "The *internet*, some are tagging it."

"Aptly yclept, wouldn't you agree, Dr. Ghibelline?"

"Oh, do call me Liana."

"Done. And I'm Astrid, of course," Dr. Guelph reciprocated.

"So, he *is* coming to the conference, then?"

"That's what I hear. It would be something of a coup, he's such a recluse."

"Who's coming, you say?" asked Tzara.

"Riche," huffed Barnett Neale, as he sank into the sofa.

At the sound of this name, Roz stopped pouring. She was unsure she had heard what she thought she had heard. She resumed filling Tzara's glass and handed it to him. "Who's Riche?"

"L'Gardinier Riche," said Neale flatly. "Very nice. I love Italian leather."

"Oh, really. Present from my sister." Roz tried to sound off-hand.

"Well, you know," continued Dr. Ghibelline, "I wrote a reply to an article about Riche that appeared recently in *Outre Other*. Can't recall the name of the author."

"Not that Diego E. Santiago quack again, is it?" Tzara yawned in exaggeration. "Let's propose a toast instead."

"No, not the sage from Manshu U," Ghibelline said distastefully. "I detest that man."

Neale's pudgy palm was massaging a supple, over-stuffed arm of the sofa. "Herr Doktor, mind you, Jaime del Rio Diego y Santiago. Didn't our polymath do his post-doc at an off-shore degree mill? He may be a native speaker, but his translation of the *Cid* clearly indicates he had no more than two years of high school Spanish."

"Very good, Barney," smiled Randolph thinly. He was uncomfortable in such exchanges and slow off the mark. In fact, he was a no-start, forever reduced to half-smiling knowingly. He wanted desperately to rejoin, but nothing clever ever came. It was agonizing to sense something just beyond cognition, to feel it off the tongue and to know it would remain there, even when he returned home late to slouch in his study with a brandy. If only his house had a stair, he mused, or his library a *Bartlett's*. Hey, that's not bad, he congratulated himself. If only he could make it fit some context or other. Too late, too late, and he immediately hated university: the egos, the politics, the sycophancy and careerism. He sipped from his glass. "Very good," he repeated.

Astrid Guelph listened carefully, her pale eyes moving from speaker to speaker. There was still no real agreement about the writer, Riche. At length, she spoke directly to Ghibelline. "You wrote a reply, did you? The article was last issue, I believe. It was in support of Quintal's running critique. What a firestorm he has raised."

"Quintal, Riche, or Santiago?" asked Ropoliz rhetorically.

"Tempest in a teapot," rejoined Randolph, who raised a lazy eyebrow to Neale. It was no secret that Professor Neale had little regard, if any, for twentieth century writing with the possible exception of *Grendel*, the Beowulf legend from the monster's point of view.

Guelph drained her glass. "Well, we'll have to read your reply then."

"Wonderful," said Ghibelline. "I'd like to hear your comments."

Raising his glass, Tzara interjected: "A toast, everyone, to the Eco Professor of Semiotics, my colleague and old friend, Hortense Thelema."

"By all means," said Ropoliz intently. "To the Eco Professor of Semiotics."

"Excuse me, Doctor," said Ghibelline, "but why..."

"Make it 'Bix,' please..." insisted Tzara.

"Yes, Bix... Why is it she resigned from the committee so late in the day?"

"Why, chemotherapy, of course," replied Tzara. "I thought I'd mentioned it."

"Oh yes, cancer," said Guelph. "Stupid of me to forget."

"But it was I who forgot," corrected Ghibelline.

"Say," interrupted Neale. "Didn't she diagnose the disease in advance of the doc..."

"Indeed she did. Read the signs herself, Barney. So everyone; although you've yet to meet her... Here's to Hortense." Tzara raised his glass.

"Yes," said Roz, clinking her glass against Tzara's. "Absent friends."

"Cheers," said Randolph, winking at her. She raised an eyebrow and turned to the table.

"Remarkable," said Neale into his glass.

As Dr. Guelph moved to sit at table, Roz gave a start that she caught in the corner of her eye. She pushed the chair at the head of the table back into place. "Oh, of course. This must surely be for Dr. Biederbeck."

"'Bix'," smiled Tzara, tapping a fingernail against his glass. "Announcement, everyone. Let's not stand on ceremony. As head of this committee, this is my only directive: please *call me 'Bix'.*"

"All right, *Bix*" responded Guelph, gesturing playfully with her hand. "Let me guess. You once played cornet."

"No musical ability whatsoever. Actually, my father was the one. He played trumpet and named me Biederbeck, overriding my mother who preferred Clarence. After Clarence Day, I think."

"Isn't Clarence Day observed fifty days after Bloom's Day?" said Ropoliz as an aside to no one. He had not eaten all day, and the wine was making his head feel light.

"Pleeeease..." beseeched Tzara good-naturedly.

"Well," said Roz, "you're definitely not a 'Clare' -- if one must enunciate clearly, to avoid saying *éclair*."

"If it's to be nicknames all 'round," began Randolph, "call me 'Randy'." Then he thought that perhaps "*éclair*" might make the old boy good enough to eat? "Say, wouldn't *éclair* make..."

"But I haven't a nickname," protested Liana Ghibelline. "Not even 'Lee', at least not since I was a very little girl."

Randolph was frustrated that Ghibelline had interrupted, but also relieved. He knew he was late again. Timing was everything.

"Nor have I one," added Astrid Guelph, sitting down first, to the right of the head.

"Nor I," said Ropoliz.

At this, Barnett Neale leveraged himself up from the sofa. "What? No nickname! Nick, isn't it? Short for Nicholas."

"Yes it is, but no it isn't," smiled Ropoliz. "Just Nick. Straight, no chaser." At this, he emitted the slightest of snorts. Guelph turned to him but said nothing. She was still analyzing his allusion to Bloom, in the light of everything she knew that she knew about the modern English novel.

"Bix, you're sitting here, please," said Roz, pulling out the chair. "Everyone else is *ad libitum*."

"If everyone's for themselves, dinner is apt to be mean, brutish, and short," said Tzara, sitting down. "But then, not to fear; we are all good doctors and close colleagues."

Roz pushed in his chair and excused herself to bring soup from the kitchen.

"*Ad libitum* then, and not *lex jangala*," Neale rejoined. "Although, as a rule, one ought not to mix Latin and Sanskrit, even in a jungle."

"Oh for heaven's sake," said Ghibelline, sitting down across from Guelph and shaking her head. She peered over her glasses at Neale and spread a napkin over her lap.

"If not *ad libitum*," replied Tzara, "then *ad libatio*. Pour me another, would you, Roz?"

"What's that?" called Roz from the kitchen.

"Through the patter of rain, my parched voice," said Tzara, reaching for the sherry.

"I'll just get that," said Randolph, rising. He couldn't help himself. He filled Tzara's glass, set the bottle before him and, moving toward the kitchen, called "Need an extra pair of hands?"

"What, a fish with a bicycle?" came the response. Randolph thought it sounded playful.

From the kitchen door, there was an aroma of dill weed and spice mingled with roses. Suddenly, in his mind's eye, he saw the space between her perfectly symmetrical breasts. It was there that he had first smelled that faintly rosaceous *eau de cologne*. Weak light slanting from a small window fell across Roz. Such lovely lines, thought Randolph, as she leaned over to sniff a pot on the stove, stirring it slowly. He fancied he felt the undulation of the soup and swelled at the inane image of a rose and its prick. His pulse was a riot.

"Vichyssoise?" he asked, sibilantly.

"Maybe in the fridge," she replied. "This is simmering."

"Indeed," he said, approaching from behind and cupping her breasts.

She resisted quietly but firmly: "Not here, not now."

He retreated. "Then where and when? Last week, the week before... We've missed each other."

"Have we?"

In an hallucinatory instant, the orderly spice rack on the spotlessly white counter, the copper skillets hanging on the wall, and, wildly -- Why did he suddenly notice? -- the lack of magnetic nick-nacks on the refrigerator door all conspired against him; and he sensed himself overwhelmingly and ridiculously exposed.

She turned away toward the stainless steel sink, wooden spoon in hand, turned on the tap and began to rinse. "You know I've been busy."

"Of course. Everybody's busy. So when?" he insisted in a whisper.

"Tomorrow. After orals."

He leaned back against the counter. "How about something oral before orals." He tried to sound relaxed. He remembered being relaxed on the first day she had entered his classroom, when they had gone for coffee after and talked for hours. To lighten his tone, he tried to ward off thinking it was a light-year ago. "I know, crude bad joke."

"Then leave it alone." Soon, she reminded herself, without further ado, *adieu*.

"Roz," he pleaded in an undertone.

"Tomorrow, Randy."

He couldn't stop himself. He struck an attitude. "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in it's petty pace..."

"Wrong play." Such distance in a terse sound. "*Romeo and Juliet*, is what you want. What's in a nickname? Really, Dr. Randy, you'll have me for a nominalist yet."

"That's why we love you, *Rose*." For once, he felt he got the timing and the tone right.

She smiled. "Love among royal pronouns? That'll be the day." She took potholders and lifted the soup from the stove.

He blurted: "If it's my wife that you're..."

"Believe me, it's not. Bowls are on the sink board, if you still want to help?"

Saying nothing, he collected the cold white Corning ware and trailed her through the archway.

In the dining area, the members of the committee had settled into their seats and taken up positions. Their fervent voices, Roz assumed, were not only sparring but straining to speak over a quavering aria.

"That's all very well," Neale was saying. "But the real Romantic hero is of a different order than your what's-his-name, who probably belongs on the cover of *People* magazine."

"He's not particularly *my* what's-his-name," said Ropoliz. "But I take your point that we know too much about prominent people for them to have stature."

Roz set down the soup, went over to the amplifier and lowered the volume.

"Oh, no, Roz," said Guelph. "That's Maria Callas, isn't it?"

"You know it is," said Ghibelline. "I just love Puccini. Turn it up again, Roz."

Roz raised the volume a click shy of the last level. The soprano felt too intense after the quandary in the kitchen.

"Ah," said Ropoliz expansively, pleased to find diversion from his exchange with Neale. "Joe Green's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. The incomparable Callas with Giuseppe Stefano. Released in 1956, but recently re-mastered and re-released." He said this the way a lampooner of wine might describe finish and aftertaste.

"Puccini, isn't it?" repeated Ghibelline to no response.

"I prefer Tibaldi," stated Neale flatly. He was irritated at the interruption and change of subject. "Or even Birgit Nihlson."

"In Verdi? Wagner, you mean," said Tzara in *bonhomie*. "And then you just like album covers with Nihlson in breast plates."

"Psshh." Neale pushed his glasses up his nose and smiled sheepishly.

"Never mind, Barney," said Tzara, shaking his finger. "I'm a bad boy, too."

Ghibelline was stern. "We have a barbarian at the gate. And it's not the one with a horn on its helmet." Without humor, she added: "Best not to mention the horn's location."

Tzara was surprised. "I was only joking, Lee."

"Liana, if you please."

Tzara looked not only surprised but wounded.

"1956, you say," said Neale, "but re-mastered?"

"I believe so," responded Ropoliz. "Wonderful sound, though some purists still prefer vinyl."

"Amazing what this new digital technology can do," observed Guelph. "You know, the Smithsonian has a mammoth project to digitalize early sound recordings; wax cylinders, that sort of thing."

"Do they?"

"Yes, I've heard about this," said Ghibelline. "It's fueling long overdue revisions."

"Really," said Tzara distastefully, as though he knew quite well.

"Oh yes. Playing right into the hands of Neo-Marxists like Bourbongeois."

"It could prove interesting, all right," said Ropoliz.

"How so?" Roz had made her way around the table, ladling soup. She raised an eyebrow to Ropoliz, who seemed to be enjoying either a private joke or Tzara and Ghibelline. She filled her own bowl and sat next to him. "How so?"

"Background noise, for one," Ropoliz said simply.

"I don't follow," said Roz.

"Background noise. People talking," he continued. "You know, ol' Woodrow Wilson, barking into a microphone, hoping it will pick up his voice. Meanwhile, the gentlemen behind him are blissfully unaware that *even they* are being recorded in their little intrigues. All on the record, just waiting for technology to separate the sounds."

Neale came alert. "You mean to say that *now* we can hear what they were..."

"Yup." Tzara slouched back in his chair. "It's providing fodder, all right."

"Extraordinary," said Neale, who momentarily gave every indication of having joined the 20th century.

Ropoliz spoke again, rather carefully. "My students always chide me for bemoaning the burning of the library in Alexandria. But really I sometimes think that nothing has been lost at all. It's out there, all of it somewhere, floating in the air. Every word that has ever been spoken."

"Physically impossible," said Guelph. Ghibelline nodded in vigorous assent.

"Well, I wonder what the fellas standing behind Mr. Wilson thought was impossible," answered Ropoliz. "Imagine, Barney, telling one of your medieval Icelanders that one day there would be sound recordings of their sagas."

"It's physics," countered Ghibelline. "The physics haven't changed."

"Yes, that's right," agreed Guelph. "Sound waves dissipate and disappear."

No one spoke in anticipation of the reply. Ropoliz thought a moment, then quietly said: "I'm thinking butterflies in Brazil, and that a causal chain will one day be traceable. That the energy is not lost, just transformed. I guess I don't know how to explain it."

"You don't, because you can't. It doesn't fit physical laws." Having finished her soup, Ghibelline laid down her spoon. "Very good, Roz."

"Physical laws as we understand them, now." Ropoliz's voice trailed and disappeared. Again for a moment, no one spoke.

"That would be something, though, wouldn't it?" allowed Tzara. "What a charivari that would be! All that brittle dialogue, digitalized. Poor Plato."

"All the inanities, murmurings, and plots; every word ever spoken in anger or in jest; the lies, the half-truths, all out there in one inexorable whorl. Like standing under a starry sky and knowing, in every vibrating fiber of your being, that one day radio telescopes will be as obsolete as Leewenhok's lenses." Ropoliz drained his sherry.

"What?" said Guelph, who by now had forgot Clarence Day, too.

"Hm." Randolph had not a clue what Ropoliz was saying, but he nodded all the same.

Tzara shook his head. "The immensity of existence in the enormity of detail."

"My, my, Nick Ropoliz," said Ghibelline. "You *are* a romantic, Barney's definition notwithstanding."

Neale fenced the air with his pipe. "We were contrasting Romantic heroes with Lord Byron and some movie star or other..."

Guelph turned to Randolph. "What are they talking about? Come on. You've been quiet all evening. Hasn't he, Roz."

"Dormant as a dormouse," said Tzara.

The telephone, an old French radial dialer, began to ring. Roz rose from the table, raised the receiver to her ear and spoke into the mouthpiece, a black orchid on a sturdy stalk.

"This is Roz."

The table fell silent.

"Yes, Cat. Everything's fine."

She listened intently, responding with "Oh" or "Uh-huh" or "I see." After a minute, she said: "All right then, we'll talk tomorrow. I'll come by after orals. Yes. See you then."

Roz replaced the receiver, glanced around the table and said: "My sister, Catherine, is leaving for Europe. I'll have to meet her tomorrow, after the examination. She wants me to look after things while she's away." This explanation was an improvisation. The call had brought her back to form, and she had seized the moment. There was no need to see her sister immediately after the examination, except to extricate her self from an unpleasant prospect.

Ghibelline frowned. "I hope there's no problem."

"No, no," said Roz. "Just a vacation. It's all rather sudden."

"Oh, what a shame," said Guelph. "Not about the vacation, I mean, of course. But..."

"Then your committee cannot take you to lunch," said a disappointed Tzara. "We had planned, you know."

"Can't be helped," said Ropoliz.

"No, I suppose not."

Randolph was crestfallen. From across the table, he hoped to catch Roz's eye, but she avoided his gaze. Although he could not be sure, he thought he saw on her face something other than the usual self-possession; something more like fleeting embarrassment. But then, everyone was staring at her, and himself most of all. He was only too aware of that, as he became aware, too, of the music, and looked down upon his sweaty hands.

The synchronicity was appalling. Ordinarily, Roz would not mind being the center of attention; but at this moment, with all eyes upon her, she was palpably returned to her very first photo-shoot. The reason was that damned continuous-play button, a feature she earlier had thought could be pressed to advantage. It was *The Police* again, and nothing, this time, could be done about the music:

*Devil and the deep blue sea behind me
Vanish in the air you'll never find me
I will turn your face to alabaster
When you find your servant is your master*

Chapter 2

What really had changed since the late Victorians? Relations of power and distinctions of gender remained. If there was change at all, it was in the subtlety, the trace, of the mask. Even at university, in 1987 important chairs remained filled by those who wore size 38 boxers. Not only that, her latest freelance work, in arenas of supposed freedom such as the art world, demonstrated that the phallus was still axis mundi. All those binary oppositions and metaphysical distinctions: high-low; serious-popular. It was all claptrap that conspired against the feminine principle and its will to power. It wanted exposing.

Roz did not, however, explain the legacy of the late Victorians in these terms to her committee on the following morning. When the oral exam was over, there were congratulations and embraces from each member of her committee, and each in turn stood with her as Dr. Tzara fussed with his trusty Olympus camera. After promising to meet with them in the evening, she departed for her sister's house.

With the examination past, she could relax, enjoy the drive, and rehearse the matter that had kept her up the previous night. Going over the little information she had gleaned from Tzara and Ghibelline, she was sure she could arrange things around L'Gardinier Riche.

His imminent visit to the university was, in at least one sense, shamelessly good fortune in that it coincided with her project. Here was the mountain, coming to Mohammed -- but she would have to play her cards right. That was how she explained it to her self. She knew much had changed for him in the past ten years. He had gone from obscurity to nomination for a Nobel Prize, and his fame now came with an attractively modest notoriety. The situation required care and resourcefulness. His coming was important to her project, so there was nothing else to be done. She simply had to work out the hook-up. That matter settled, with only a dim awareness of her cognitive compages, Roz removed her attention to a different compartment.

Now out of the city, past pocket parks and strip malls, Roz looked for landmarks from one previous trip to Catherine's spacious lakeside home. She scanned passing street-signs... Natchez, Briarwood. Where was it? Which was the one? Some bird's name or other she could not recall. Cardinal Parkway? The yards got deeper, the foliage greener, and the manors larger all the way to Richelieu Circle -- that was it -- where she turned into a winding gravel drive narrowly lined with poplars that recalled her to a poster for Monet at Giverney. It would be her next purchase from the museum's gift shop, she decided. She stopped the car before a high wall with a wrought iron gate and a new sign: *Private No Solicitors (Or Barristers)*. That almost certainly was Houghton's hand. She reached into the glove compartment for a packet of cigarettes. She had been trying to quit for some time, and had done well this past week; but just now she felt a need. She hoped her sister's husband would be away. There was a tension between them. It was in the way he sometimes looked at her.

When Roz finished the cigarette, she opened the door and flicked the butt into a shrub near the gate. She climbed out of the car without closing the door and depressed the discolored button on the intercom. She pressed it again, impatiently. There was a scratchy response:

"That you, Rose?"

"Yes, Cat." Roz pushed open the gate at the buzz. She decided not to walk. She got back in the car and, without closing the gate, drove to the house.

She had forgot how large was her older sister's residence. She had yet to see an entire wing. How could such a monstrosity have so little ostentation? Roz supposed it came of the mansion's ambivalence of architectural style. It was neither eclectic nor postmodern. What it had was an indefinable presence.

She parked away from the lilacs. Their odor was oppressive. The massive front door opened as she came up the steps.

"I'm glad you could make it so soon!" Catherine had her hair pulled back, and she was smiling broadly. "Come on in."

She led Roz through a small anteroom with stained glass door into a high-ceilinged space sparsely furnished in Scandinavian teak.

"You're looking marvelously well, Rose."

"Something new, Cat?" Roz pointed to a glass orb hanging in the room's large Palladian window.

"Yes, yes. Gift from Houghton, who has become a devotee of Feng Shui since his last trip to Hong Kong."

"Oh, surely not! Our Houghton -- he of practical affairs?"

"The very same," said Catherine, shaking her head. "Still, I do like the colors it throws on the wall. See my rainbow?" Other than the spectral bands across an opposite wall, the room was severely white and devoid of decoration.

"He's in Hong Kong now?"

"No, he's down by the lake, playing with his new toy."

"And what's that?" Roz tried not to sound anxious.

"He's bought a sailboat." Catherine shook her head. "A rather large one, too, considering the reservoir. Still, it's why he wanted to move here."

"You don't regret it?"

"Oh, I don't know." Catherine stared out the window. She seemed to be looking over the trees across the lawn.

"Don't forget Aurelius."

Catherine turned to her: "Aurelius?"

"He says one might live well even in a palace."

Catherine smiled at that. "Did he? Oh, yes, the *Meditations*. It's been ages. How about tea?"

"Coffee would be better."

"Done." Catherine rang a small bell. "We have maids now, you see. Cambodian. Sisters rescued from a border camp."

A darkly attractive girl of perhaps nineteen, Roz could not be certain, appeared with a slight curtsy. "Yes, ma'am," she said, almost unintelligibly.

"Coffee please, Ving. For two."

"Yes, ma'am." Head bowed, the girl left the room.

Catherine looked at Rose. "At least I think her name is Ving. She has a twin, and an older sister."

"Three of them? How long have they been here?"

"Just a couple days."

They sat down and talked. After explaining that she did not feel comfortable ordering maids about, Catherine allowed that a large house needed more than her two hands. She changed subjects to the oral examination and asked about dinner the previous evening; but she was

hoping for more information than Rose seemed willing to convey. That was fine. She decided not to ask about her freelance work, at least for now. Instead, Catherine invited Rose to go shopping, after lunch. Perhaps she stood a better chance of catching up with her younger sister after a glass of wine.

They left the house after leaving a note for Houghton near the telephone. Catherine felt the "I'll buy if you fly" principle should apply, so they took Roz's car. She suggested lunch in the So-Bart, the city's increasingly popular bohemian district. It was becoming gentrified, and she knew of a nice corner bakery called "*Javier's*." Roz made a counter-proposal. She wanted to stay away from the So-Bart and the art museum, so she suggested having lunch at a sandwich shop near a boutique specializing in oriental carpets. The eatery was down Barton Boulevard, not far from the university.

"You'll love it," she said. "Besides, you need something on that big oak floor. We can look after lunch."

"I'd rather thought we would go shopping for clothes," said Catherine.

"But you'll want to buy in Italy."

"I meant for you," Catherine said pointedly. "Early graduation present, and to say thanks for house-sitting while we're away."

Over lunch, Catherine spoke animatedly about spending the summer in Europe. She was again practicing piano assiduously, and she hoped to play for a gathering of friends on her return. This was news to Roz, because Catherine had put aside the dream of a concert career in marrying Houghton Moorland. He had been full of promise and youthful promises, Catherine said, the first of which was to make up for her sacrifice. Over the years, he delivered; his success was more than she had hoped. It was also different than she thought it would be, but she did not tell Rose how or why.

After lunch, they went on a spree through the row shops off Danae Street on Crabapple Road. Before mirror after mirror, Roz held blouse after blouse to her neck. Catherine looked for color-flashes under Rose's chin, then studied each article carefully, checking seams.

After a time, and somewhat absentmindedly, she told Rose to keep the borrowed chairs and table-leaf. "May as well; no use in schlepping them around. Besides, I'm changing from oak to teak." She fumbled through her bag and found a leather case from which she selected a credit card. At the counter, she handed it to a wraith-like clerk painted in black lipstick and heavy mascara.

"I really don't know how to thank you," said Roz.

"It's I who should thank you, for looking after things while we're away," said Catherine. "Hey, I've got an idea. We could swing by the art museum. What do you say? I haven't been there for ages. Contemporary Art has a new exhibit, and I hear some of it's not too bad."

"Oh, not today, Cat. I'm wrung-out from orals. Really. And it's hot and humid after the rain last night."

"We needed it." Catherine glanced at her watch and said: "It closes at four. We probably haven't time enough, anyway. How long does it run?"

"End of August, I think."

"Then I'll miss it, I guess. Won't be back until September, probably."

"It's not that good, Cat." As soon as Roz said this, she wished she had not; but she was reflexively critical. It was out before she could stop it.

"Then you've already seen the show?"

"When it opened. A freelance assignment."

"Oh? Did you write a review? I didn't see you in *Arts & Entertainment*."

"I might write some afterthoughts, when the show comes down."

"A kind of *pentimento*?"

"Maybe I'll make that the title." Roz decided to say nothing about the review that had appeared in last Sunday's supplement, under a pen-name.

As they left the boutique, Catherine said: "Listen, Rose, I've got to tell you something. Really, it's a little embarrassing. But I have to admit it's flattering, too."

"So? Tell me."

Catherine took her arm and leaned to her ear conspiratorially. "I had a reason for wanting to go by the museum. It's because... this is all rather convoluted, but it's because Houghton has this idea to have my portrait painted. Seated at the piano, no less."

"All right. But what's that got to do with the museum?"

"Well, he has someone in mind -- one of the artists in the Wettin-Willis Collection. But I guess I already know what you think of..."

"Now wait, Cat..." Roz stopped walking. "I didn't mean..."

Catherine turned to her sister, who was standing apart, palms upward. "It's all right, Rose. I know you're more interested in whatever's on the cutting-edge. You probably think this whole idea's silly."

Roz thought it was saccharin, but said: "No, I think it's sweet."

Catherine looked nervously pleased. "Do you think? Y'know, there's an opening tonight. Houghton's going and wants me to come along, because he's meeting with the gallery people."

"So you're going?"

"No, of course not. I mean, how could I? It's too embarrassing."

"Do you want the portrait or not?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. What do you think?"

Roz shook her head. "What I think doesn't matter. It's what you think..."

"Then I'm not going, which is what I told Houghton already."

"All right. Don't go. So what's the big deal?"

"I'm not sure, he may invite them over for drinks."

"You mean the gallery people?"

"Of course the gallery people. So I want you to stay over tonight and don't say no. I need moral support. Besides, you owe me."

They came to the car, and Roz opened the passenger's side. "That's blackmail, coercion, and duress. Which gallery?"

"*Gallery Rumpman*."

"You don't mean Sanford Eliot, do you? *He* has an opening tonight. But how's he going to paint a portrait? He's a conceptualist, if anything."

"No, not him. He's in the exhibition at the museum." Catherine got in and sat down.

"You must have heard that a painting was attacked a couple days ago."

"Yeah, but nothing very serious. Just some nut case. Someone was copying a painting, or something like that, and left a box of paints unattended. Then the nut case took a brush and smeared paint on a... what's-his-name Nygaard. Isn't he the one? The artist, I mean. The one who's painting was..."

"That's the one. So I wanted to see. Besides, you could write about it. Make a great story."

"No thanks." Roz shook her head. "Too many other loose ends. Besides, I bet we can't get near the painting. If it's even hanging at all." She recalled the title, *Redivivus*, and thought it ridiculous.

"Probably not. Too late anyway. But now you know who's painting the portrait."

"Really. He paints portraits?"

"Apparently."

Roz thought a moment, then said: "Painting your portrait while you're in Europe?"

"Sounds a bit strange, doesn't it. Not only that, the artist is staying at the house. That's another reason I want you around this summer. Houghton wants this done in the grand manner, whatever that is. I suppose rubbing elbows with an artist-in-residence is part of it."

"Except you'll be away."

"Yes." Catherine smiled. "Houghton has taken scads of photographs the artist can use. He says everyone paints from photographs now, anyway."

"So, an artist is coming to stay. Sounds very 19th century."

"That's Houghton."

"Ah."

"Besides, if I don't like the portrait, we can stage a break-in, you and me. Make it look like your nut case found the portrait. So, are you staying tonight?"

Roz thought it over as she closed the door and walked around to the driver's side. She was displeased that the new clothes came with strings attached, but she also thought that meeting the artist could be a hoot and/or gossipy filler for the next *So-Bart Arts*. Besides, she could avoid Randolph, should he decide to drop by her apartment in the wee hours. She would have to phone Dr. Tzara and make excuses for the evening; that was all. She settled into her seat, buckled the safety belt for her older sister's benefit, and said: "Why not? We'll make pasta, drink wine, and tell lies."

"Then it's settled. A slumber party for two."

"Sounds good." Roz turned the ignition, released the brake, and pulled away from the curb. "Now, to avoid rush hour. We may have to go West by going East a ways."

"The new toll road?"

"Yeah. Let's try it."

Within an hour, they returned to the great house, where the new maids were nowhere to be found. Roz followed Catherine upstairs to a bedroom with a writing desk, then downstairs to a ballroom awash in light, and through French doors to an adjoining music room. Both rooms were to be "decorated over the summer." Without further elaboration, Catherine then led Rose through a passageway and narrow side door that opened onto the grounds. They took a cursory peep into the guesthouse and sniffed the most recent blooms in the garden. After they swam in the lake and showered at the boathouse, they blended margaritas. They cooked, gossiped, opened three bottles of wine and talked while waiting for Houghton until nearly 11:00 PM, when Catherine said: "Too late for cocktails now, I suppose. What do you think?"

"I think we've done our bit."

"We've missed the monologue, but we could turn on Carson."

"I'll pass. *The Tonight Show* positively creaks. And I'm all in, anyway."

Catherine started to pour more wine, but the bottle was empty. "Yeah, you're right. Let's call it a night. Leave the dishes."

"I washed them after dinner, remember?"

Catherine's brow knitted. "So you did. Hey, where are those three, anyway."

Roz laughed. "Some sweat shop you've got here."

"I guess. Can't even recall their names rightly."

"Ving, Ding, Something-with-Ing."

"Ning, I think." Catherine looked again at her wristwatch and frowned. "The opening must have gone well. But then, these things always run over."

"I'm turning in. They're coming in the morning anyway, right? Come on. Houghton can fend for himself."

Catherine shrugged and ground out her cigarette.

The next morning, Roz woke gradually. From her pillow, she looked around the room, from the neat nightstand with marble top and brass lamp, to the leather winged-back chair, to the freshly painted closet doors, to the sparse bookcase, to the writing desk, to a brass clock with its face turned away. No matter, it was Sunday and she did not want to rise yet. She did not want to see a paper, and she did not want a cigarette. Coffee? No, not worth going downstairs. Closing her eyes, slipping in and out of wakeful sleep, she had a strange sort of half-dream based on the dinner Friday evening, but mixed with a freelance assignment about the museum. There were her committee, Leonardo, Duchamp, and Fritz the Cat. It made no sense, which she knew while she was dreaming and interrupting it to edit dialogue or change scenes, standing back and watching, yet all the while at the center of the action. A curator with a Warhol soup can under his arm was walking through the museum's gift shop, and his Doc Martens sounded as if there were ground glass from Kristalnacht or *The Bride Stripped Bare* underfoot. The steps got closer and closer, until...

She opened her eyes. Roz heard the crunch of gravel through the bedroom window and threw off the bedclothes. She went to the window and looked upon the driveway below. Three people were approaching, two men and a woman. She could not distinguish what they were discussing.

So this was the trio Catherine wanted her to meet. When her eyes adjusted to the sunlight, she knew one man to be the owner of *Gallery Rumpman*. He had spoken with her recently about Sanford Eliot, and the woman had been there, too, seated on a sofa. Roz had regarded her as window dressing and forgot her name as soon as they were introduced. The third member of the party was almost certainly the *Redivivus* man. What a lark. To her surprise, although she did not know him at all, she knew she had seen him, too, somewhere, and recently. Yes, it was the same day the painting had been attacked. She had been on assignment. He had been in the coffee shop at the museum... eavesdropping her conversation... staring at her from behind dark glasses. She had sensed it; she had known it. So that was the artist. Now, he would be painting her sister's portrait. How odd.

She heard the doorbell below, then Catherine's voice: "Sorry I couldn't come to the opening last night. I had a migraine, but today's better. Won't you come in?"

Roz glanced at herself in the mirror. She knew no one would recognize her but decided this was not the time or place to be without protective coloration. She had no time to put herself together, to make a suitable presentation. When they met, it would have to be on her turf, in her own time. Catherine had a migraine? For now, she thought, a bubble bath would serve. When Catherine came upstairs to retrieve her, Rose complained of having cramps. She needed a good soak, she said. That's all.

Part Two : Summer

Chapter 3

It was Tuesday, and Catherine was going. That was the message on the answering machine. Houghton had moved up the departure, and she was leaving for LAX that afternoon with no time to pack (!). Roz played the message twice but saw no reason to respond.

When she came to the mansion on Thursday, Ling (or was it Ching?) pointed to a note under a jangle of keys on the kitchen counter, the note Roz had written Sunday before slipping away. On the reverse, Catherine had scrawled something about Hong Kong before Italy. Roz crumpled the note, took aim, tossed it into a basket.

Another muddle avoided, by not responding on Tuesday. Besides, she was busy at the art museum's coffee shop and also writing about the local artists to whom she had attached the name "*alternates*" in the first of four installments running in *So-Bart Arts*. The first installment went well because of her enthusiasm for discovering the subculture. The second installment, based on interviews, had bogged down. The alternates were circumspect, even close-mouthed. Those who worked part-time in the kitchen of the coffee shop possessed a practiced indifference toward any exhibition that came to the museum. Most reserved a special animus for the touted Wettin-Willis Collection. *Basically*, it was too safe; too *retro*. "*Basically*" was the definitive signifier, the 'tag on the rag' for negative reproofs from any alternate. Beyond that, no one said much. Other than what was discounted, what did anyone think?

Sometimes Roz caught alternates sipping *kabushino* at *Javier's*, where their talk turned on alternative music. Art went largely undiscussed, although some read Suzi Gablik and some *The New Criterion*.

To Roz, this did not compute. After three months waiting tables and helping in the kitchen, it appeared that being an alternate was more an attitude than a coherent position. On some level, one needed only to dress the part, as she had been doing. It was tricky, but nothing so dangerous or difficult as Griffin had done in *Black Like Me*, the book that had suggested her modus operandi. Being an alternate was like dressing in Catherine's clothes when Roz was little, only she wasn't just playing a part. Roz felt authentically one with the alternates. She sensed solidarity. As a critic, she too was in the trenches; only she stood apart. She knew herself to be the intellectual wing, part of the necessary division between art-workers and elite theorists.

Why was her series stalled? She was turning thirty. Could they tell, under her makeup? That could be why they were holding back. The alternates seemed to draw the line at twenty-five. Being much older was suspect. Her only scoop was a rumor these outsiders with red hair, black eye shadow, tattoos, and pierced septa were planning a *salon de refusés* to counter the museum's biennial. That gala invited "established artists" like Sanford Eliot. But in the So-Bart, his name was mud. He was compromised for accepting a commission to do an installation for the lobby of the Samuel F.W.B. Morse Federal Building. And as if that were not enough, word on the street was that Eliot preferred a vibrator. This was a little too stylish, a little too obvious -- an incursion into the feminine prerogative. It was supposed to be fish that did not need bicycles any more than women needed men.

Was it timely to quit the museum? Besides suspecting she had already seen everything she was likely to see, a would-be poet was coming in too regularly. She knew he had fallen for her cover. *Had she but world enough and time*, she might have infiltrated the alternates through him. He was sincere, and that made him an attractive curiosity, like an old wax-cylinder

phonograph or a lock of hair in a locket. On the downside, he was seeking a soul-mate, of all things. Roz had unadvisedly shown him a poem intended for *Harper's*. That was dangerous. Worse, because she was bored, she let it slip about writing under a pseudonym. Her equation might be sufficiently complex to admit various outcomes, but the would-be poet asked too many questions and hoped for answers. He was naïve. He actually wanted to know.

Another reason to leave was that the planets seemed to be aligning. With summer here, with the final reading of her dissertation, with an essay on Gertrude pending in *The Shakespeare Quarterly*, and with L'Gardinier Riche in residence at university, she kept visualizing the Chinese ideogram for danger/opportunity. Given also the artist in Catherine's guesthouse, the conjunction was complicated.

Roz had yet to put the painter in a mental compartment. She saw him in her mind's eye, the reclusive Thomas Nygaard, coming to Catherine's door. Something did not mesh. It was the Sunday following Watanabe's review of the Wettin-Willis in *Arts & Entertainment*. She had panned the entire collection and his painting in particular. From the upstairs window, Roz had put a face to his name. What was unsettling, challenging, was recognizing that face as the man who sat in the coffee shop, eavesdropping her chat with the poet-wannabe, and all the while appraising her from behind a pair of dark glasses. She understood dark glasses, and she had felt his eyes.

But something still did not mesh. The coffee shop was on Tuesday, also after the review, and it was the same morning his *Redivivus* was attacked. Of course; it was too coincidental, his being at the museum the same morning as the attack. She smelled another story entirely, one that might jump-start the series in *So-Bart Arts*.

He had stared at her cover but did not know; could not know who is who. If he didn't recall at all, the advantage was hers. Roz had only to find time enough to play this one, too.

That afternoon, she met Dr. Randolph for lunch. Under the table, she adroitly massaged his inner thigh, then paid the bill and made excuses for running. In the evening, she brought clothes and toiletries to the lakeside house, entering through a side door. From down the hall came laughter. The maids were in the television room, watching reruns of *I Love Lucy*. She did not announce herself.

Ensconced upstairs, she turned on a low light and laid out everything upon the bed. After hanging clothes in the closet, Roz opened a briefcase full of papers and began to sort. She was not in the mood, so she sat down in the wingback, opened a pack of cigarettes, and lit up. She watched the smoke wind lazily, serpentine, and considered how she was smoking again as part of her cover. She recalled a computer in Catherine's bedroom and tiptoed down the dark passage toward the door, but her reflection in the expanse of passing windows caught her eye, caused her to turn, to peer out. There was a dim light emanating from the guesthouse. It went out, and she pulled away from the glass instinctively. She was not ready to be seen.

Forgetting the computer, she returned to her room. She was up and down until dawn. She seldom slept well, the first night in a strange bed. She tried reading, then writing, then a change from pajamas to an oversize tee shirt. When pale orange light settled upon the guesthouse, she showered, dressed, made coffee downstairs, spoke briefly with one of the maids and left for the university.

Ordinarily, Friday morning, no matter how early, was not an ideal time for checking messages at the computer center, but she had not logged-in all week. To her surprise, there was no one at the center except an attendant working a crossword puzzle. She was quickly on-line

and went directly to electronic mail. Five messages. Three, foregone conclusions from Dr. Randolph, she deleted without opening. The message from Dr. Guelph had "*Ghibelline*" in the subject line. There was also a message from Dr. Ghibelline, no subject. Roz decided to open that one first, to see what the old boot wanted. When she saw her father's surname in the salutation, she swallowed hard. Formality meant trouble.

Dear Ms. Stein:

I am most distressed after receiving an ill-advised letter in reply to one I recently sent to the *Outre Other*. I'm sure you'll remember it. It was in regard to Dr. Quintal's critique of L'Gardinier Riche, who is now in residence. What upsets me is not the intemperate tone of the reply, but that it should come from a colleague, a member of our committee. I am referring to Dr. Guelph, who is apparently concerned to protect her own version of history rather more than to preserve the spirit of collegiality.

Faithfully,
Liana Ghibelline

Too consumed by her project, Roz had not read *Outre Other* cover to cover for a long time. Of course she recalled someone mentioning Riche when the committee came to dinner, but she was otherwise at a loss. She opened the message from Dr. Guelph.

Dear Roz,

I must regrettfully inform you of an odd business; especially so coming from someone as politically sensitive as Dr. Ghibelline. It involves two letters, one to the editor at *Outre Other*, the literary journal. Of course, the writer was Liana Ghibelline. The second letter was my own, and, although it was not for publication, it was somehow forwarded to Ghibelline. I was informed of this when she called me at home, in a manner I can only describe as acrimonious and brusque. Frankly, I was more appalled by her lack of professionalism than by her errors in opinion. Imagine anyone supporting that Riche character at all, much less his prejudicial accusations concerning Holy Church during the last world war. All such matters have been addressed in appropriate forums.

I am sorry that this should burden you unnecessarily. However, I find the prospect of further association with Dr. Ghibelline to be distasteful at best. I intend to speak with Dr. Tzara about her continuing association with the dissertation committee.

Sincerely,
A. Guelph

Rereading the messages, Roz felt annoyance more than anything. She was considering whether to respond to either, when a new message appeared. It was from Dr. Tzara, who was transmitting from his home. She clicked it open.

Roz -- in haste. Have a brush fire to stamp out, as you must know. Astrid and Liana can be difficult at times, the dears, but not to worry. No prob. Damage control is here!! Bix

Another message from Tzara appeared. It was the same as the first. She clicked to reply and quickly typed: A thousand thanks...R. Then, she clicked "send."

It was as easy as flushing a toilet.

Chapter 4

After spending the weekend writing, Roz decided it was time to meet the artist. She dressed for the occasion in baggy army surplus pants and a tight baby-blue sweater, worn braless. She bounced downstairs and poked her head into the ballroom. He was drawing. On the floor were nudes, mostly female torsos, in conte' and charcoal. For several minutes she watched him working, intently considering shape and shadow. Suddenly, she was seized by an impulse to insert herself forcibly into the scene -- partly from boredom, but also as a test -- to find out if he really was the bourgeois with a brush that she suspected. She rolled the dice.

"My breasts are perfectly symmetrical," she announced. She stood with feet spread, her hands on her hips. "Most women have one breast slightly larger, so the shapes vary. But mine are perfect."

The artist looked up and gave her an appraising once-over, the slow ocular rape of *mirada fuerte* -- nothing like the furtive glances behind sunglasses when he sat in the coffee shop.

So, she thought, he gets even with his eye. She decided to have fun, changed her posture and softened her attitude. "You're the one, aren't you ... let me get this right... you're the one who painted 'a length of bourgeois forearm'?" She smiled. "What fun."

His reply was cool but civil. "Then you know Ms. Heine-Watanabe."

"Never met her, though you could say I'm familiar with her work."

He nodded perfunctorily. "You're Catherine Moorland's sister." He looked down at his drawing.

"Rosalva."

He looked up and nodded. "Your sister said you freelance."

"A journalist, I suppose, if a Masters qualifies." Roz did not mention her doctoral studies. It seemed prudent to present herself as adequately qualified to have an opinion, but no more than that.

With an entirely different goad in mind, she glanced exaggeratedly over his shoulder at the drawing in progress, then deadpanned: "Interesting. Over the years I have come to the point I can tell when a woman has been painted by a man. There is such doting attention paid to breasts. I think woman haven't this curious obsession."

He looked at her warily. "Oh, I don't know. "Last year there was an exhibition of lesbian art that seemed dotingly attentive to me. Or do I mean obsessive."

Roz removed a thin case from the thigh pocket. She selected a cigarette, lit up, and sat astride a ladderback chair, backwards. "Mind if I smoke?"

He laughed quietly. "Suit yourself."

She decided to push. "Mind if I watch?" When he did not respond, she exhaled a long train of smoke in his direction. She was enjoying herself. "Go on," she said. "Draw. I want to watch."

He put down his pencil, folded his sketchbook and asked: "Do you always insist on being the center of attention?"

"Almost always. But not this time."

"I see. And your breasts, being perfectly symmetrical, must be implants."

"Bold after all. I like that." Roz emitted a small, appreciative laugh. From his face she could see that he thought he had given as good as he got. We'll see, she thought. "No, they're real enough. They're just perfect, that's all. Care to see? Or would you rather work from your head."

Roz seized his hesitation, smiled demurely, and in one smooth motion peeled the sweater over her head, dropped it to the floor, shook her hair and looked at him directly, without batting an eyelash. Then, combing her fingers through her hair, she slowly raised her arms and clasped the back of her head. Turning her torso slightly, she said: "Well?"

He got up without looking at her, walked over to the sweater and picked it off the floor. "Let's see. I'm supposed to decide if you are the *Maja*, Miss June, *Les Demoiselles*, or a little girl who likes to play doctor. Right?" His eyes locked on hers.

With hands still clasped behind her head, she met his gaze by breathing in slowly and deeply; then exhaled and languorously said: "When I grow up, I want to be an odalisque."

"I'll bet." He extended a hand to grasp her under the chin, turned her head cruelly side to side, and assessed her profile. When she did not lower her arms, he kissed her, hard. She pressed herself against him and sucked his tongue, even harder. When he gasped for air, she pulled his hair, forcing his head down between her breasts.

"Hear it?" she breathed heavily. "My heart's racing." She forced his shoulders down to her knees. He grasped her buttocks and, with his teeth, unbuttoned her pants.

She decided to let him "take" her. It was going according to plan, although she had not actually made one. What she had done, before coming down to the ballroom, was to dress with an eye to stimulus-response. This was any woman's prerogative. Now, in the midst of field research, she was analyzing the removal of her battle fatigues -- proof positive that men are helpless. She wondered did he feel somehow irresistible?

What a lark, to be living in a mainstream movie. They started on the floor, rolled into the piano room, chased each other down the hall, engaged on the stairs, and played in an upstairs shower. Then it was dinner with wine and repartee. She lit candles in a guestroom and fell onto the bed. The games ceased. Slowly, their coupling relaxed. It became strangely tender.

The next morning she awoke to find herself facing him. She did not remember falling asleep. When she stirred, he awoke. She pulled the sheet over her breasts. He pulled it down, kissed her nipples and took a long look at her. His gaze was steady, and there was no appraisal or challenge in it. It was the kind of gaze she imagined Chardin would have given a still life. He did not say good morning; he did not say anything.

The stillness, which made her feel not quite herself, was pleasant but unnerving. She felt an inexplicable desire to say something -- to tell. It was not to make a confession -- she was not the one for that -- nor was it for the sake of openness. It was more a need for rehearsal.

"I'm publishing an article," she began.

Rolling onto his back, he squinted slightly at the ceiling and said: "Yeah? Where and what about?"

She turned to the side, resting her head upon her folded elbow. In a modulated tone, she spoke into his ear. "It's called 'Real Place and Mythic Space: The Body Imagined Contextually.' It'll be in a journal called *Outre Other*. They publish me sometimes. Ever since my internship."

That was where she wanted to start -- Guadalajara, Mexico, where she had been sent on assignment. Everything else was just stuff.

She lay supine, pushed the sheet down to her navel, and told Nygaard that she wrote a great deal under a penname. It was necessary. Freelance work covered what her scholarship did not. She was completing a degree in cultural studies that would permit her to teach in different tracks. Her main interest was issues regarding gender, the social construction of the female body, how that body is appropriated in mass media, politics and the arts. Now, it was crunch time. She said she wanted to finish before she turned thirty, and turned her face away.

"Oh," he said. "Assessment time." He turned onto his side and looked at her closely. She was older than he had thought.

"Nothing so drastic." She recouped from what she recognized as a momentary lapse. Her sense of *jeu* was returning. "Besides I'm having too much fun... well, undercover. I know, bad pun. It's an ice age ago, but do you remember Gloria Steinem as a *Playboy* bunny? You know, she worked at a club and then wrote about it."

"Ahh... her *cause celebre*."

"I did something similar in Guadalajara."

"You were a bunny?"

"I'll tell you if you promise not to laugh. Promise?"

"Without crossed fingers."

"I was a singer at a hangout for med students. Expatriates mostly; so that's why the covert operation. Someone thought the school was a degree mill."

He started to smile broadly.

"Now stop that; you promised, remember?"

He stifled a chuckle. "Can't help it. You, tilting at windmills."

"Degree mills. Besides, I'm not Donkey H."

"You want to run that by me again?"

She poked him in the side. "Don Quixote. Donkey, Jote. Donkey H."

His smile turned to a feigned grimace. "Was it a degree mill?"

"Tsk." She shook her head. "Never found out. There were problems and I didn't finish the assignment. But the point is that I'm at it again, as part of my dissertation."

"And?"

"Dare I tell you? It'd be fraternizing with the enemy."

"Your destiny calls and you go..."

"Mine own *cantus firmus*. No guts, no glory."

"What are you talking about?"

"Going undercover. I'm doing it. In So-Bart."

"Espionage in So-Bart." He repeated this matter-of-factly, but it sounded utterly absurd. "In So-Bart? What's so... Come on!"

"In a way. I'm researching the alternates. The twenty-something postmodernists. You know... the ones with green hair. How they live, how they think, their influences, their relation to mass media and the establishment... All that."

"Establishment? In So-Bart?" His tone was incredulous.

"Yes, establishment," she insisted. "The museum, the dealers, the collectors. The *older* artists who may or may not be in the Wettin-Willis Collection."

"Wet Willie? You think being in Wet Willie equates with being in the establishment, as you call it?"

"None of the alternates has a commission to paint Catherine's portrait, now do they."

He bit her on the nipple, then rolled onto his back.

"Time to get up," she announced. "Have to get to work. And so do you."

"Yeah? Well, before anything else, I think you should know something."

"All right. What?"

"I mean, I have to be honest about this."

"I'm *waiting...*"

He stared at the ceiling and in a robotic monotone said: "*They... are... perfect.*"

She thumped his temple with her middle index. "Told you, didn't I."

Chapter 5

She disappeared from the great house without saying a word or leaving a note, and she was gone several days. She needed time to assess the situation, to get a grip on the dualism that she understood as a constant pulling and pushing between the impulsive and deliberative aspects of personality.

But work came first. Among other things, although she had accepted an advance and the deadline was past, she decided not to submit the meditation on *vagina dentata* as a euphemism for fellatio. It needed further revision, she had standards, and she was fortunate to have an editor who understood. Instead she completed "*Denotations of Desire in Popular Media: A Gendered Ethics.*" Oxford University Press of New York, a white plume in any author's hat, was showing considerable interest in this manuscript on the exploitation of women, a learned treatise with a personal tone. Throughout the process of its composition, sensibility, correctness, and point of view were paramount. Roz felt certitude in having written from an academic objectivity without compromising an explicit subjectivity. It had been a process of empowerment.

Roz considered herself to be process-oriented, and that orientation required the nurturing of a balance. Just now, that balance manifested itself in three important aspects: staying clear of Dr. Randolph, keeping aloof of Catherine's artist-in-residence, and preserving her cover at *SoBart Arts*. These things done, she could focus on another, more timely matter which Fate's left-handed step-sister seemed bent on spinning, an unavoidable joke of near-cosmic proportion, a dangerous opportunity with potential to test her resourcefulness and resilience. It was almost delicious. As she readied "*A Gendered Ethics*" for overnight mail, she began to rehearse strategy. It happened, however, that no plan was needed.

Thanks to a short series of lecture-discussions at City University, hooking up with Riche proved much easier than Roz had anticipated. After his presentation, she simply raised her hand to ask a question from the back of the hall. He was slow to respond. Not that her question was difficult or that he had recognized her behind sunglasses and with her hair pulled severely back. She could feel it was her voice that had caught his attention. Then later, when he was standing

distractedly in a circle of admirers, she made sure that he saw her from a short distance. When he nodded uncertainly, she walked straight toward him and, as the expression on his face changed, removed her sunglasses and smiled. After ten years, it was as simple as that.

"Rosalva," he said, kissing her forehead.

They had a beer together in the *Skeller*, a subterranean eatery in the student center. It was dark and heavily gothic in atmosphere. Riche blew out the candle on their corner table, because he said the lighting was "too Frankenstein." His elation in seeing her was coupled with a sense of time compressed, so much had changed and yet so very little. Then he apologized for using that cliché. He asked question after question about everything that had happened to her since Mexico, but without recrimination. He took her hands and kissed them. He searched her eyes.

She was amused. When the *Skeller* closed, Roz took him to her apartment. It was a small gamble, but she was certain Randolph would be home with his wife on a weekday night. Besides, before leaving for the lecture, she had disconnected the telephone from its jack. She had put her manuscripts away. Everything was readied. There was no need to leave a telling title on a coffee table, half-hidden by a folded paper. Riche was the sort of guest who studies the titles on a host's bookshelf. She knew he would find his own chapbook, with a last postcard placed among the leaves, when he ran his fingers along the spines in her collection.

They took a taxi and climbed the stairs. Inside the door, she flipped the switch for a low table lamp. She turned on the CD player and thought "Alas, for the lack of *Lonely Harpsichord on a Rainy Night*." She had made the acquaintance of this venerable old LP during the summer of her seventeenth year. It seemed years ago and only last week. Fitting she should think of it, now that she understood one person's high camp was another's flamenco guitar, unobtrusively low, like a cool flame of blue fire. It was all signifiers, context, intention, and interpretation.

Riche entered slowly and looked around. He moved toward the bookshelf.

"Mi casa, su casa..," she said, gesturing expansively. "I'll just be a moment." She slipped into the kitchen nook to siphon pinot grigio from a gallon container in the refrigerator. Roz filled two long-stem glasses and pushed close the door before he called out:

"So, you have *Que dia tan trieste en Guadalajara*. Deathless, isn't it?"

She set the glasses on the counter. "I like your prose-poem in *Outre Other*." He did not answer. She unfastened the top button of her blouse, took the glasses and dipped through the doorway's glass-bead curtain.

"Rosalva?" He turned as she re-entered the room. He seemed more surprised to see her coming from the kitchen than when she had walked up to him after the lecture. "I can't get over how little you've changed. Physically, I mean. I know you've changed intellectually. A great deal, but then..."

"And you. A little salt and pepper at the temples, but you're still lean, mean, and six-foot, aren't you? Here we are," she said, handing him a glass. Then she reiterated: "By the way, I like your prose-poem in *Outre Other*, even though the title's a bit forbidding."

"*'Feast of the Epicleti'*."

"That's the one," she replied melodiously. "Especially interesting was the..."

"Oh, let me guess," he interrupted, his voice falling, attenuate. "The rose epiphany?"

"Yes, of course."

He held his glass to the lamplight. "Beautiful color. Isn't wine wonderful. Does more than malt or Milton can."

She smiled slyly. "What? To justify God's ways to man? Okay. We won't discuss the rose epiphany. Cheers."

"Here's looking at you."

Rosalva raised her glass, retorted "Mr. Bogart," then gave him a *carpe-diem* stare. "Wait a minute! We could... we must watch *Casablanca*. I have it on video. Come on! For the Class of '77 and *Auld Lang Syne*?"

"The video I *lent* you?"

"Don't be anachronistic." She poked a finger in his belly. "No video cassettes then."

He put his glass upon the lamp table. "Wouldn't you like to talk?"

She drew closer. "Why can't we see the movie at the same time." She slipped her free hand inside his trouser pocket. "Besides, there's an important question that needs answering."

"A question?"

"Yes. A question."

"I'm all ears."

"No you're not. Is that a pistol in your pocket, or are you happy to see me?"

Riche shook his head. "I can't believe this. So that's the question?"

"Is it too hard for you?"

He looked at her steadily, then deadpanned: "Where's the television? Don't tell me you don't have a -- what's it? -- a home entertainment center."

She laughed. "Just follow me." She removed her hand from his pocket, hooked a finger under his belt and pulled him toward the bedroom.

What began with a Mexican cartwheel ended up being tentative and tender, as they lied in the light of a single candle and watched the wall where shadows of their fingers touched tip to tip. Playfulness had transformed into an intimacy that, after a little, became suddenly unnerving. The changed mood was accompanied by that same unwelcome vulnerability she had felt years earlier, when the emotional syllogism always led from intimacy to entrapment.

She broke their embrace to fluff pillows and arrange bedclothes. When she settled down to lie on her side, Riche said matter-of-factly that she had just scored with James Bond, and he told her a picaresque tale of being a stand-in for a sequel shot, but never completed, in Thailand. Wonderful title, he said -- *You Only Live Twice II*. She laughed at his murmured anecdotes and watched the candle behind him burn down. As the light faded, he kissed her shoulder and fell asleep. She lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling she could no longer see.

The next morning, down in the kitchen, Rosalva remembered dreaming. In the dream, she was an extra on a movie set. It had been a long time since she last dreamed of being in the movies, though it happened regularly, once upon a time. The dreams were always disjointed, with a *film noir* quality and difficult to recall; no more than an image here and there. Always, they affected her mood adversely. She was not one for keeping a journal on the nightstand or for using dreams as a basis in her work. On the whole, dreams were an imposition that she preferred pushing toward the back and to one side, out of view.

By the time she returned upstairs, all was forgotten. She roused Riche, served coffee in bed, and then pleaded all-day appointments. She mentioned an assignment and a plane for Los Angeles late that afternoon. She pushed him into the shower.

When they dressed, she felt his appraising eye as she hooked a brassiere, buttoned a blouse, ran a comb through her hair, and selected a shoulder bag. "Well, I'm packed," she said. "Overnight's in the car. Are we ready?"

He gulped the last of his coffee. "Set."

Rosalva gestured to the mug. "Leave it on the dresser. Get 'em later."

It felt like the bum's rush. Riche feigned nonchalance, but he was out the door before he knew what was happening. Feeling the redundancy of ring-a-ding-ding, he swung his coat over a shoulder and followed her downstairs to the street. She did not speak. She strode purposefully to her car and unlocked the door on the passenger's side. She held the door open. He ducked in, she closed it, and he felt ridiculous adjusting the seat and fastening the harness.

She walked around and got in. "Sorry about the hurry. I forgot what day it is."

As soon as the engine turned, she pulled away and turned down Barton Boulevard. They were a half-hour before the morning rush. She fidgeted with the radio, then popped a cassette in the player and pushed the button for surround sound.

In not many minutes, she dropped him in front of the Hotel Mistral. Disembarking, he looked at her intently. "Guess I'll see you when I see you." He pushed the door closed carefully and stood at curbside.

Rosalva pushed a button to lower the window. "I'll call when I get back."

He nodded, his mouth pursed.

"Here, wait." She reached into her bag to find an envelope and gave it to him. "Meet me. It's an invitation to the opening of a new space, a gallery downtown. I have to be there, but we'll have dinner after."

Without looking at it, he stuffed the invitation in his pocket.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Ciao, bella."

She waved and sped away. The morning rush was beginning, the rats in the maze. Not just rats in a maze, she thought, but anesthetized, vagotomized, paralyzed, artificially ventilated rats.

She drove west of the city for over an hour, then decided to return to the mansion and brought the car around. The turnabout irritated her. It felt vaguely labyrinthine. But it was not the real source of irritation. What was annoying her, troubling her, was the last thing Riche had told her about his experiences during the shoot in Thailand. He mentioned an affair and, from the way he spoke of */the exotic object of his desire/*, emphasis hers, Roz recognized that, for at least a time, the woman had replaced Rosalva in his imagination. The data were difficult to process. Not only could she not cotton onto the idea, she was experiencing unusual levels of cognitive noise.

Nevertheless, she took re-affirmation in knowing that her reflexes were still reliable. She would be on assignment at the opening for *Uni-Pros*, a joint venture among the university's art professors. Riche, as artist-in-residence, would no doubt attend the exhibition anyway as a fait accompli to the lecture-discussions; so her impulse in giving him the invitation had been sound economics. Two birds, one stone. Besides, she was suddenly in a playful mood, and the opening might be used as a skill-sharpening divertissement.

The matter sorted, she began to enjoy the drive to her sister's house. A longer but scenic alternative route connected finally with Natchez, and then came the inevitable turn at Briarwood. How many times had Catherine followed these roads, made these turns? Roz had driven to and from the lake but a few times since encamping for the summer, and already it was a stultifying routine. How did Cat manage it? At Richelieu Circle she followed the serpentine drive all the way to the wrought iron gate with its sign: *Private No Solicitors (Or Barristers)*. Of course, Cat had a sense of humor about mundane things; but Roz knew it would take more than humor for

her self to feel relieved upon returning home to Richelieu Circle at the end of each and every day.

She parked in the shade of an overgrown lilac and entered by the heavy front door. She called to the maid, "Is anyone home?" but there was no response. Honestly, she thought. Why bother having maids at all. Then she heard pulsating music from the television room, the brassy theme from *I Love Lucy*. Never mind, leave them to their reruns. She advanced into the kitchen and noticed an ashtray on the counter, next the coffee maker. There were dishes in the sink. She glanced at the clock over the oven, coming on eleven. Off a few minutes, she thought.

She went downstairs to the music room. There was a voice other than Nygaard's, raspy and impatient. She peeped surreptitiously around the jamb to see Thomas standing with an old man, a bantam-like figure with a shock of white hair.

Then she saw the wall. She took a deep breath. How could she have missed anything so obvious, for even a second? Restraining herself, she eavesdropped from the door. They were looking at the wall, discussing form and archetypes and the notion of Arcadia until, by and by, their voices fell away. There was barely a sound. It was time to seize the moment. For her part, Roz decided to ignore the obvious, to take the wall in stride. Surprise, being so pedestrian, was better left to others.

She bounded into the ballroom.

"Arcadia?!" she exclaimed, making her entrance, center stage. "Out of reach. No way. Not even irony'll help." Then she gave the wall a dismissive glance, to signify that the problem was the wall painting itself, not that a painting was on the wall.

She nodded to the old man pleasantly and remarked off-handedly that universal symbols were too deterministic; she wanted freedom. "Sorry, I couldn't help overhearing." She winked at the visitor and said that some artists should not paint the way they do.

"Where you been," said Nygaard. "This is William Larch, official guest and a past member of the brotherhood. Meet Rosalva, about whom I've told you nothing."

"Pleased to meet you, Rosalva," he said.

Roz shook the old man's hand, then removed two cigarettes from a case and said: "Tom doesn't smoke, nor do the maids. Dr. Watson would deduce that you filled the ashtrays in my absence." She surprised herself. Why had her mind jumped to a Conan Doyle character? She did not like detective stories. But of course, last night Riche had noticed her borrowed copy of *The Yellow Fairy Book*, the one Dr. Tzara had lent her months ago from his collection of arcana. Next, she remembered that she had yet to receive word back about Guelph and Ghibelline. That was the nexus. She certainly had not mentioned either to Riche.

"Dr. Watson?" said Nygaard. He made a reference to a monograph Holmes had written on tobacco ash. It was too strained and cabalistic to be funny, but Larch took up the silliness and began trading lines.

Boys, thought Roz, who don't know when to stop. They apparently appreciated a series airing weekly on PBS, the funding of which might have gone to a performance artist like Laurie Anderson or to a writer like herself. By way of diversion, she offered Larch a cigarette.

"Thanks. Don't mind if I do." Larch took the cigarette, inserted it in his mouth well past the filter, and lit up. As he took a deep draw, she noticed his yellowed index and thumb.

Redirecting the subject, Roz asked whether the wall painting was allegorical and what it signified. When Larch suggested that she ask the artist, Roz reflexively baited Nygaard by taking a theoretical turn from her pillow talk with Riche and stated that, just as the content of an

author's mind is past anyone's reach, including the author herself, so is the content of an artist's mind.

Larch took another draw on the cigarette and asked: "Are you sure what you're saying?" "I might be unsure, all right, that you heard what I said," she replied.

Larch picked a small strand of tobacco from the tip of his tongue. "I see," he said. "That clears it up."

Roz was disappointed when Nygaard did not take the bait. She wanted to play with him, to irritate him, not some old man. But he persisted in saying nothing even as the conversation turned into a disjointed series of position statements. The old man, it seemed to her, was born to argue. Probably spent hours a day on a park bench, harassing passersby. They touched upon a dizzying number of topics in no time at all. She mentioned a forthcoming installation at the museum, one that incorporated found objects and various media to the point of sensory overload. He said the ambience of sensory deprivation in many galleries goes hand in glove with a fashionable disillusionment that drives artists and curators to define art negatively. She said the artist no longer functions as a hero on a quest; nor does the audience believe that art is a holy grail. He said no one has the balls to embrace art as destiny. She responded by asserting that artists and audiences are captives of the zeitgeist. Larch retorted that there were at least two ways to deny freedom, being beholden to traditional values or shackled by zeitgeist. When she broached theory, Larch seemed not to hear. Instead, he began disputing the formalist argument that the integrity of a work of art can be grasped immediately and claimed that significant work is often concerned with the artist's inward and idiosyncratic feelings about the tradition. Then he talked about Braque, in whose writings art is described as a process of transformation.

All the while, Nygaard said nothing. Roz hated argument from silence and glanced at him in a white heat. In a coolly controlled exasperation as Larch moved the argument from painting to literature to the analysis of character, Roz labelled his analysis "pre-Lacanian." It was meant to be a zinger, but when he failed to bat an eye, she was ready to pull his flowing white hair. Was he familiar with Lacan? He merely ignored her and asked how could Rembrandt paint searching portraits or an author produce coherent characters? Roz countered by saying that intelligibility is an illusion; that characters are mere products of the responsive imaginations of different readers, and not identical. Besides which, the system of language or style of brushwork mitigate against any direct knowledge of anyone.

But how do you know that, Larch kept insisting. "If what you say is true," he continued, "that the mind's content is unreachable, how can any author be credited with understanding the psychology of any character?"

"I don't credit authors with understanding anyone's mind," Roz replied. "No more than I credit artists with achieving any exactness, for the idea must also be transmitted through the hand. Less so, then, from a painter. All we get is the semblance of the content of an author's mind. An author having more than one personality or facet of..."

"So Shakespeare is Caliban and Shylock... and they are the content of a particular psyche."

"Yes, in a manner of speaking. But Shakespeare's Caliban is not mine, which is different from yours."

Larch asked: "And how do you know that?"

The discussion had come full circle, so Roz decided to close it. "How do you not *not* know it?" she asked. She felt sophistic at the use of a double negative and was unsure that it said what she meant. But there it was, and that was that.

She watched the old man take a last, meditative draw on his cigarette, more like sucking it than smoking it. Then he looked at Nygaard and shrugged his shoulders.

Another case of arrested development, she thought. The oral stage.

That afternoon, she left them to their own lights. In the evening, she persuaded Thomas to have dinner down by the boathouse. This was the regimen for the next three nights. They ate dinner, drank wine, watched the sunset, and argued about everything. On the first night, when the low lights around the house flickered on, she led him into the cottage, loosened his belt, and told him that fellatio was her favorite character in *As You Like It*. On the second night, she ran him through some aerobic exercises from a leather-bound and profusely illustrated edition of the *Kama Sutra*. On the third night, she determined to see how he managed a Mexican cartwheel.

The following morning, without leaving a note on the pillow, she was gone.

Chapter 6

So-Bart's intelligentsia made for a curious crowd of academics, aesthetes, and alternates. At the opening of *Uni-Pros* were gents *en grande tenue* with women in elegant gowns, but also off-the-rack Armani, corduroy coats with elbow patches, peasant shirts and denim, biker leather, ripped garments held with safety pins, tattooed ankles and toe rings, all mixing surrealistically yet easily. Roz, too, had dressed for the occasion, her incognito consisting in a red pullover, black leotards, and red boots. The ensemble's protective coloration included a powdered white face, a heavily but precisely pencilled brow, stenciled red lipstick and dark glasses. On this particular evening, she took the additional precaution of concealing her raven tresses under a lamp-black wig. Over her shoulder she slung an oversized Italian leather purse, black and red, into which she had tucked an efficiently small Japanese recorder, its microphone fastened to the fold in the flap.

It was showtime. Small pockets of animated acquaintances revolved slowly past a raised platform supporting a pedal harp, but no harpist. Instead, a discrete sound system played elevator music for the New Age, a melange for piano, guitar, Andean panpipes and wind chimes. Nearby the harp-stand stood a bar tended by a blonde babe with an open, self-possessed smile in a face that was familiar but Roz could not place.

For half an hour Roz cut through the milling crowd that seemed more interested in the newly renovated warehouse than in the found-object and neo-constructivist sculpture or graffiti-inflected expressionist paintings; all of it, she thought, a decade or more behind Manhattan. The space was minimal, *de rigueur*, and clean -- white walls, track lights and wooden floor, nothing more. She noted panels spaced evenly across the ceiling, butt-ended in the corners, and guessed they were to dampen sound. Indeed, for such a cavernous space, the slight reverberation was the faintest of echoes. Four of five stars for the space, she told herself, two stars for the art; and she

settled upon "flat work" as a provocative new term she would employ to describe everything two dimensional in the show. The sculpture she would ignore entirely; criticism by omission.

"Hey, Elana!"

Roz turned. It was the pest from the museum's coffee shop, the buzz-cut with the ring in his left lobe, a writer-wannabe. Tonight his hair was orange.

"Hey," she said. She tried to sound friendly but preoccupied.

"What's doin'?"

She shrugged noncommittally. "Same old same old. See it, write about it. You know the tune."

"Do I. Second verse, same as the first. Can you believe this stuff! Bourgeois with a capital 'wah.' Like, make that 'do-dah, do-dah.' Know what I mean? Hey, Camptown Lady, how 'bout *Javier's* for cappuccino after. Join the motley crew. What say?"

"Sounds fun but can't. Deadline to meet."

He shook his head. "Yeah, all work, no play. I hear ya, but ya gotta kick back sometime, ya know? Gonna miss some killer weed. El primo."

She smiled no.

"Well, maybe next time."

"Yeah. Next time."

"You got it. Hey, there's Riker. Gotta run. Listen, you take it easy."

"See ya."

She watched him move toward a small coterie of the more extreme looking, a group of Alternates planning to open yet another cooperative gallery that would close in six months. They might be the subject of continuing research, but for now she wanted to steer clear. There was another objective she had in mind, and they would definitely impede the flow. She moved away, cast her eyes about, did not see him, then gave cursory attention to a pair of silk-screened images: *Hommage to Albers I & II*. They were bizarrely derivative, not of Albers' renowned square, but of Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. Roz saw significance immediately, the iterability of mis-iteration. She made a mental note and moved on.

Her thought again turned to the private entertainment that was this evening's objective. She began to see the invitation to the opening as a litmus paper. Could it really be that he was neutral toward her and had decided not to come?

Slipping past the bar, she spotted Thomas, just a wadded paper napkin's-throw away. It already felt a year since she had absconded from the guesthouse. Jazzed with adrenaline, she ducked then bolted quickly beside a small group gawking at the price on one of Sanford Eliot's hard-edges. She felt fairly certain he had not seen her. She also felt deliciously charged, aroused, a sudden sweat in the small of her back. But what if he had? What a lark. However amusing, it really was much too close, because she had told him about working undercover and, subliminally, he might put pieces together. Mr. Nygaard would know when she was ready for him to know, and it would be on her terms. To that extent, she wondered why she had not imagined the ersatz recluse might be here, networking, cashing in, since the attack on his painting had put him in the public eye? An oversight, considering she had a hand in it.

She had focused too narrowly on the evening's private entertainment, going unrecognized before Riche. Now it would have to wait only a little longer, until the next lecture-discussion, given Mr. Nygaard's complicating presence. A tactical retreat seemed prudent, even necessary.

It had been such a simple scheme to go awry. Were one a man or mouse, one might be reduced to a nonplus. Not she, however; she was process-oriented. Another opportunity, and better, would present itself by and by.

It would have been memorable. There was no way to conjure the critic Matthew Quintal; but, at the very least, Roz had determined to allow Riche a glimpse of Elana Idos without his ever realizing who is who and what is what. That was the be-all, the end-all of the entertainment, and it was only fair play. In any good detective yarn, the audience must be presented the clues. Then the quick change, *Übermensch* in a phone booth, and *voila!* Rosalva would have boogied into *Uni-Prof*s fashionably late. One for the books, her forthcoming best-sellers.

Then again, sometimes the best plan is to have a little luck. Abandoning the evening's divertissement, Roz made her way to the door just as Riche was coming in. O, fortune's child! Accompanying him was the oddest couple, the plump owner of *Gallery Rumpman* and his leggy assistant who, fortunately again, was familiar with Yolanda, not with Elana. The assistant was arm-in-arm with a distracted man of studious demeanor. Riche, with a faint smile half-cognizant of the red and black concoction, stepped aside for the curious creature in dark glasses to pass. The creature reflected his smile, confronted him with a whiff of French cologne, and slipped into the night.

Mission accomplished. She walked briskly around the corner to the Greyhound station, where she had cached clothes in a locker. She found box A083, produced a key, turned the lock, opened the door, pulled out a bag and pushed the door closed. She went to the Women's Room. It was harshly lit, humid, and empty.

In the long mirror, she caught her reflection, the flushed neck under the powdered face, the engorged nipples impressing her sweater. The reflection disturbed her more than usual, and not just due to the purple harshness of fluorescent light. She was ambivalent of her appearance. It was not easy to be in possession of such a sultry but useful resource. In the odd contemplative moment, her sculpted physique gave rise to untenable thoughts of biology as destiny. And now that she was writing a theorized politics of the female body, any thought of exploitation was extremely distasteful. And there was, too, uneasiness about her progress in the world, whether it was based on merit and intelligence, cleverness, or something else. Not that she ever allowed herself to frame this final consideration in those precise terms. Her mind would jump before such a formulation could be made -- as in this very moment, seeing herself in the mirror, she recalled suddenly the opening lines from *Feast of the Epicleti*, lines she had scathingly quoted in a recent review:

*Monsieur Le Beauceaux approached the cool white fountain with trepidation.
Glancing side to side, he checked reflections in the mirror, to be certain that,
should the door open, he would not be visible to passersby.*

Riche's recurso, she called it. She smiled at her reflection, removed her sunglasses, rinsed out a basin, then filled it with cold water. From the bag, she removed soap, a hand towel, and a zip-pouch of toiletries. She washed her face, dried it, entered the cleanest stall and bolted the door. Changing quickly into a black, back-less evening dress, knee-length with a severely high-collared bodice, she stuffed boots, sweater, leotards and panties into the bag, then stepped into stiletto heels. Back at the mirror, she applied one or two subtle touches around her eyes, dabbed a different scent behind her ears, ran a comb through her hair. Perfect.

After stashing the bag in the locker, she returned to *Uni-Pros*. Along the way, a passing auto slowed, its passenger window rolled down, and a comically longing voice called "Oh, baby." She waved ta-taah and turned at the steps of the gallery.

She made a careful entrance and kept to the side when she saw Riche, again the center of attention, surrounded by admirers, including the couple from *Gallery Rumpman* and a woman whom Roz knew to be an adjunct professor of Middle Eastern studies. The adjunct professor was talking animatedly, Riche was listening attentively, and Rumpman was sipping champagne and nodding in agreement. Meanwhile, his leggy assistant, looking away guardedly, inched closer to her escort whose face, no longer distracted, registered pleasant surprise. The assistant, however, appeared anxious. Then Rumpman turned like a weathercock, bellowed "Here's our Tom!" at Nygaard's approach, and introduced him to Riche.

Roz moved carefully closer, shielding behind one group, then another, until she was positioned behind a large, sheetmetal construction. She heard Riche say, "I saw your painting" and Nygaard's reply, "I read your book." Then the adjunct professor said something to Nygaard, something Roz could not make out, and, with a sour expression, abruptly excused herself.

What was that, Roz wondered.

Nygaard asked: "So what is this *Hokusai's Great Wave*?"

Riche waved his hand as if to say don't ask. "Well, it's a book actually, a millstone around my neck. In its third rewrite. You don't want to know, believe me. Haven't the foggiest where it's going. Damn thing has a life of its own."

"Oh really. I think I now what you mean."

Riche mentioned Nygaard's painting at the museum, that he admired it. "Quite a feather, isn't it, being in the Wettin-Willis?"

"Thanks; yes, I suppose it is," said Nygaard. He invited Riche to visit Moorland's manse, to see the mural in progress. "Come tomorrow, if you're free."

"Mural?" asked Rumpman. "Wha..."

The assistant interrupted: "Tom's decorating a music room. And he's painting a portrait. You really should see it. Mr. Riche, I mean -- not that Tom's critics would like it much."

Riche smiled knowingly. "Ah, critics. Believe me, I do know a little about that."

"Have they been after you?" suggested the assistant. She was hardly the bimbo so many took her to be, and she knew perfectly well.

"One in particular," Riche said ruefully. "Talk about scathing reviews; it was a diatribe really, from one Yolanda Heine-Watanabe."

"Tom, too! He's a victim!" With unconcealed glee, Rumpman quoted Watanabe's remark about 'a length of bourgeois forearm' in her review of the Wettin-Willis.

"Can't top that," said the assistant's escort.

"So, you've been initiated," chuckled Riche to Nygaard.

"A real axe job, she did on Tom here," concluded Rumpman. "Whew!"

"The painting at the museum!" mused Riche. "Amazing. Well, nevermind what some critic may think. Watanabe's a purveyor of neologisms. Frustrated and self-righteous."

"Those who can, *do*," Rumpman sagely observed. "Those who can't, *criticize*."

"And their bloody pens should be cauterized," said Nygaard.

"Boys, boys, boys," said the assistant. "We know how they will be!"

Impulsively, Roz seized the initiative. "I'll second that!" She made her move quickly and kissed Riche on the cheek, saying: "Sorry I'm late. But you know me."

"Ah, here at last," said Riche, delighted by Rosalva's sudden appearance.

She pretended to have just noticed Nygaard. "Oh! Tom..."

"Rosalva," he nodded uncertainly.

"Oh, you know each other then?" said Riche.

"Yes, of course," smiled Rosalva warmly. "Don't tell me, I forgot to mention Tom's painting at my sister Catherine's house?" Enjoying Nygaard's consternation, yet wanting to ease the air, Rosalva tendered a bone. She mentioned that she and Riche had known each other years ago in Mexico. Nygaard, she knew, would conclude they had met again serendipitously through the university. Then she might play both ends against the middle.

"I was studying medicine, if you can believe it," said Riche. "Had some vague idea of becoming a doctor. And some vague idea of marrying this one. What happened, anyway?"

"Literature called?" said Rosalva, wishing he had not mentioned marriage. "Anyway, here we are..."

"How many years is it?" asked Riche.

"Let's don't count," insisted Rosalva. She turned to Rumpman and said: "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

Rumpman extended his hand and said: "I'm Howie. Own the gallery where Tom, here, shows." He introduced his assistant, Karen.

"Pleased to meet you," the assistant smiled, reserved.

Rumpman continued: "And last but not least, Professor Marty."

"How do you do," said the escort.

"Well," said Rumpman. "It's a very small world." He smiled cordially and sipped from a champagne flute. The others followed suit, then re-engaged in small talk about the exhibition, the recent ascendancy of Sanford Eliot's work, and congressional displeasure with grants from the NEA.

After a little, and to Rosalva's irritation, Riche spoke to Nygaard in an aside. They agreed to meet the next day, when Nygaard would show him the new painting.

"A toast!" boomed Rumpman, for no apparent reason and without making one.

There was a moment's hesitation.

"Yes, a toast; by all and any means," said Riche. Then everyone smiled, said cheers, and sipped champagne. The rest of the evening, from Roz's perspective, ticked by like clockwork.

Chapter 7

It was a highly creative performance art, being a juggler, the joy of which lay in having so many balls in the air.

The next day, Roz arranged things so that Riche missed the appointment to see Nygaard's mural. It was a question of timing. She wanted him nowhere near the Moorland estate without his first receiving some rather vital background information, an accurate version of the facts. His trusting her was paramount. Given a little time, of course, trust could be acquired. In fact, Roz seldom found that manufacturing trust was much of a problem. So it followed that the day after *Uni-Prof*s was one long floor exercise, a marathon sexual tryst, a gloriously efficacious tool in

the rapid dissemination of information and part of the inculcation process that would color later perceptions.

She needed time to work out the logistics that her intuition had made incumbent. She had been put in a position of trust. Some day soon, Catherine might want to know why she allowed Nygaard to proceed with his mural. How does one explain that it was a lark, letting the great man proceed in his pretension? Likely her older sister would not appreciate the subtle irony. To her, such an explanation would be merely a muddle. Nor was it likely Catherine would appreciate the historical perspective or any parallel with Whistler's infamous *Peacock Room*, or that Roz was gathering data for a series in *So-Bart Arts*. No, the mural would be seen solely as a violation of personal space, as graffiti in the inner sanctum, what else? Perchance also it might be seen as a failure of wealth and privilege to keep Goths from the gate.

In the late afternoon, Rosalva introduced Riche to the So-Bart. They strolled unhurriedly past boarded-up windows, a liquor store, an army surplus, two cooperative galleries, an old bank converted into studios, a narrow shop that offered imported goods from India and Tibet together with cooking classes and books on meditation, and, in newly gentrified spaces, modish boutiques. The talk was about literature and theory. It was playfully erudite but without the surprising turns of fully adult conversations encompassing television sit-coms, radial tires, and second mortgages. Constricted chit-chat aside, they enjoyed themselves.

Their career brought them eventually to *Javier's*, the corner landmark, where they sat at a table on the sidewalk. As they perused a short menu in its plastic stand, an elderly quartet of properly attired Asian ladies exited the *Heavenly Enterprise Gold Shoppe* next door. The group shuffled to an adjacent table, arranged its chairs, and sat down. From inside the bakery, another Asian woman, in her early thirties, smiling pleasantly, her hands in the large front pocket of a floury white apron, brought a menu. Bowing slightly, she handed the menu to the spokesperson for the group, who placed it unread upon the table, held up four arthritic fingers and regally said, "*Kabushino*." The younger woman smiled and turned to go inside. On the way, she nodded to Rosalva and said: "Sawat-dee. One moment, please." She disappeared inside.

"That was Nute," said Rosalva. "She's Thai. Smart as a whip. I think she's studying linguistics. She runs this place with her husband. You'd like Javier. He's a character."

Riche looked up from the menu. "Bananas. I'm having banana cake, and the banana shake -- for no reason other than rhythm and rhyme. Any good?"

"Yeah. But I want iced tea."

"Of course. Saving room for dinner."

That evening Rosalva accompanied Riche to the second lecture-discussion. The audience was larger than the previous week, because English and Journalism majors were told they would receive extra credit for attending. As the topic was metaphor and its appropriation to the political process, Riche asked for a show of hands among Political Science majors. There was none. When he raised an eyebrow and shrugged, the audience snickered conspiratorially. He smiled knowingly, then began his formal presentation. Throughout, he made reference to Sontag's writing more than his own. In less than an hour, finished, he opened the floor.

When the discussion was well underway, Dr. Tzara tapped her on the shoulder and sat down heavily next to Roz's aisle seat. He looked about, observing that the number of competing hands held high must indicate that questions were another means to extra credit. Then he stated that he had come to the lecture in the hope of seeing her.

"I've been trying to call you at home," he said. "The line's always busy."

"Oh?" said Roz. "I must have taken a nap and forgot to reconnect. What's up?"

"Pettiness, pettiness," said Tzara, sinking back into his seat. "It's all so juvenile."

"You mean..."

"Yup, the fireworks between Ghibelline and Guelph. Unbelievable. Won't give an inch, either one."

Roz hesitated. "That means they refuse to cooperate."

"Yup."

She thought a moment, then said: "But that shouldn't be difficult to work around. They're at different campuses."

"It's more than that. They don't want to be associated."

Roz looked away. "Then they're leaving my committee?"

"Yup. Neither one will approve the final draft. They don't want their names together on the signature page -- and neither wants to appear as the one who backed down."

"You're kidding."

"Why would I kid you?"

Roz took a deep breath. "Well, I guess it's expected. I know you did what you could."

"Talked with them over the phone several times, and I've spoken to each personally."

"You mean you made the drive?"

"Drives," he corrected her. "Same day. And Liana's a helluva long haul for a round-trip."

"Sunnyvale. I remember," snorted Roz. "Thanks."

"Glad to do it."

"So, the final draft. What do you think?"

Tzara looked up to the ceiling, closed his eyes, turned toward her and said: "Haven't cracked it."

"That's all right. You've been busy. But any word yet from Nick or Barney?"

"Nothing. But I've heard from Dr. Randolph."

"Really? What does *he* say."

"He says sometimes your prose style reminds him of Kristeva."

"How can that be? She writes in French."

"That was his point, I guess. He said you read like a translation."

"Sorry I asked."

"He's joking, I'm sure. Kristeva's much better, even in translation."

Playfully offended, Roz slapped his arm. "You! You're supposed to be on my side."

"You know I am," he sighed. "But gotcha, didn't I."

The discussion ended, students clambered out of seats and filed to the exits. Two co-eds in the front row, books in hand, seeking autographs, jumped to the podium. Roz noticed Riche's hesitation as one of the girls offered him a ballpoint. "I never know what to write," she heard him tell them. The co-eds giggled at what they took to be modesty, watched him carefully open each book to a flyleaf and sign his name. The ordeal over, he thanked the girls and noticed Rosalva, standing to one side, with an elderly gentleman in tow.

"I want you to meet my favorite professor and Lord Protector," she said. "This is Dr. Tzara."

"Please, call me 'Bix'."

"How do you do," said Riche.

"Very well thanks, 'though I've had better days," said Tzara. "To be honest, it's indirectly because of you."

"Oh, not again. What have I done this time." His tone was cautiously humorous.

Smiling wearily, Tzara nodded toward Roz and said: "Caused a schism on this-one-here's dissertation committee."

Riche's face registered perplexity and a profound withdrawal. He said nothing.

Tzara's words hung in the air a long moment. His bonhomie, his openness could manifest itself as a lack of tact. When he realized he had been unintentionally harsh, saw it was distressing to Riche, he said: "Nothing serious. Controversy makes the world go 'round."

He explained the dispute between Ghibelline and Guelph over *Feast of the Epicleti*, how it had started in an academic journal and carried over to the committee. He also mentioned Dr. Thelma's resignation due to cancer. Finally, to underscore no real harm was done, he stated four readers remained, and that this satisfied all requirements.

"At first," concluded Tzara, "I thought Roz was complicating things unnecessarily; that or plain nuts. *Seven readers*, after all. Well, there it is. Now, it's the clearest foresight."

Riche apologized profusely, said he was appalled that his work should be the cause of any difficulty. Tzara said not to worry and repeated that the committee could function thanks to Roz's foresight. "She had six," he said. "She needs only four. To that extent, our two warring factions are expendable."

"I'm sorry about this, Rosalva," said Riche.

"It's quite all right. Everything will work out fine."

"Yes it will," smiled Tzara. "And that's that."

"Right," said Roz.

After a moment's uncomfortable silence, Tzara changed the subject abruptly. "Say, have I told you about transactional therapy? No? Well then, let me tell you. These days, I'm in session twice each week. You know me; I'm not one for this sort of thing, usually. But lately... You see, I was given a book on my last birthday. Gift from an old colleague. Hortense Thelema, actually," he said to Roz. "She insisted I read it. So I read it. Wonderfully insightful, but one would never guess from the cover. All the same, the strangest thing began to happen. I began to see everyone around me, including myself. I mean, *really see*. I can't begin to tell you how much freer I feel lately."

"Really, Bix? What *is* this book of yours?" said Roz, with an interest half-genuine.

"*The Inner Adult, Parent, and Child*. Do you know it?"

"I'm afraid not," said Riche.

"Never heard of it."

"Then you're not conversant with your inner child, Roz. Creative individuals such as Mr. Riche must be, naturally," allowed Tzara. "The rest of us can benefit from techniques set forth in the book."

After Tzara enthusiastically outlined the three modes of the adult, parent, and child, and promised to buy Roz the book, he excused himself by pleading a long, draining day -- too much of Guelph and Ghibelline dealing with each other as Parent to Child. He said he was a tired old Adult who needed his beauty sleep. Besides, his wife would kill him if his Child stayed out much later. He shook Riche's hand, told him not to fret, kissed Roz on the cheek and said "Good night, you two."

As soon as Tzara departed, Riche insisted upon visiting the library's periodicals stack, to find the *Outre Other*. This was hardly her itinerary for the shank of the evening, but Rosalva could not dissuade him from his need to grapple with the desertions of Guelph and Ghibelline.

He glanced at his wristwatch. "What time does the library close?"

"Midnight. It reopens at seven-thirty. Why not go in the morning?"

"We're here now; it's only half-past nine," he insisted. "It won't take half an hour."

"It's on the other side of campus."

"I know." He took her hand. "But a footpath through trees on a summer's night with you? Come on. Let's walk."

"All right," she said, squeezing his hand, "so you know the campus."

When they located the pertinent issues of *Outre Other*, Riche searched *Letters* and said: "Here it is; the acronym's Laugh St. Pride. Now just what is your professor's preoccupation?"

"You mean *their* common obsession, of course."

"Yes; must not forget the old boot, as you call her."

Astrid Guelph's letter was in support of Quintal's critical assessment of Riche as 'a third-rate word-slinger' after the manner of Joyce.' One difference was that Quintal took exception to Riche's reading of *Masque of the Red Death*, while Guelph took exception to "*The Holy Roman Empire's Third Reich*." Her conclusion? *Reich* was Riche-of-the-Third-Water, wholly unholly.

In the current issue, Dr. Ghebeline replied that Joyce had been called a 'word-smith' of the caliber of Shakespeare. Whether Riche was a 'word-slinger' was anyone's guess; but his "*Third Reich*" was, nevertheless, factually accurate. Finally, she dismissed as sheer barbarism Quintal's suggestion that *Feast of the Epicleti* be condensed, if published at all.

"The real contention is Joyce, don't you think?" said Rosalva. "You only presented them with an occasion, that's all. They're just protecting their turf."

Riche thought a moment. "I'm not so sure." With hesitation, he returned the journals to the shelf. They left the library without saying a word, then walked across campus quietly. Along the way, Riche stopped to stare at the stars, sighed, and said "Ah, me."

"You shouldn't take it personally," said Roz. "Quintal's just doing a job."

"No; I just feel bad that something I wrote should destroy your committee."

"It didn't destroy my committee."

"Mm."

"Hey. Let's go home."

At the apartment, Rosalva soon helped Riche console her, helped him assuage his guilt at inconveniencing her -- such therapeutic properties do candles and wine possess, in conjunction with the cartwheel.

Chapter 8

Some days later, and after breaking yet a second appointment, Riche insisted that Rosalva drive him to the house on the lake. He wanted to see Nygaard's mural before his residency came to an end. This "deadline" imposed the morning's mildly confrontational chat over steaming café au lait at *Javier's*; was expanding their corner-table *tete-a-tete* to include plans that Roz did not want to consider before noon of any given morning, much less discuss before nine o'clock on this particular morning.

Mostly they had been staying in Riche's suite at *Hotel Mistral*, and the question was, since evening would bring the third and final lecture-discussion, whether he might move into Rosalva's apartment. His flat in London could be sublet. Extending his visa should not prove too difficult, given his bank balance. With a week remaining, there was time to open an account at Barclays downtown, transfer funds by wire, and collect the application for an extension of visa.

"So what do you think?" He saw a faint smile play across her mouth, a slight hesitation in the momentary squint of an eye, then the raised brow, whether in surprise or delight he could not say. But in these fleeting seconds, a stretch of eons.

Odd what one hears when silence announces itself and pulls up a chair; or what one sees while waiting for silence to change the subject. The cleanliness of the condiments caddy, the dull sheen on the plasticine menu, the thinness of varnish on the arm of a chair, the residue of froth on the side of a cup, the loose thread of a linen napkin. Heightened senses, that one suppresses or re-channels or muddles into a muck.

He tried to lighten the mood: "Did you know that English interests comprise the largest foreign holdings in the United States at a time when American citizens are more worried about Japanese incursions into their economy? I think it's because the Japanese make such high-profile purchases. Movie studios, impressionist paintings..."

"The Nikei's booming..." she proffered.

"...automobile manufacturing, and the like."

"What about the war?"

"No sense of history, you Yanks. Everybody knows that."

"Sure, everybody." The speaker was Nute, smiling broadly, standing beside their table, her part-time help eating breakfast in another corner. "Beside, business is business -- and that's America's business. Sirent Car, your president, yes?"

"Who?" said Rosalva.

Riche smiled up at Nute. "Well, there it is."

"Ja ao arai perm mai kha? Sorry, sorry... Do you want something more, please?"

"I think we're fine, thanks. Just the check."

"Two au lait, three dollar. No, *dol-lars*. I'a bring the check. One moment, please." Nute bustled toward the cash register.

"Don't be so smug," said Rosalva, reaching for her purse. "What did she say?"

"America's business is business'. Something like that. Coolidge."

"Mm."

Riche looked intently at the intense face across from him. "Well?"

She looked past him, something having caught her eye, but said: "I can take you to the house and collect you later. I should swing by the university. We can go to the bank this afternoon, if you like."

"It's settled, then."

When Nute returned to the table, Rosalva handed her a worn five-spot stamped in purple with a date some years old -- someone somewhere waiting for the note to end its reverberations and resound to daddy. It wasn't that she disliked old money, just tired greenbacks. And she did not like having a sorry signifier sandwiched between the fresh silver-green bills in her slender wallet. "Here we are," she said; then, not wanting crumpled singles in return: "Keep the change." She rose to leave. Riche pushed in his chair.

"Thank you," bowed Nute.

"How's Javier?"

"In the kitchen. You know him. Same-same."

"Say hello."

Instead of conversation there was a cassette tape, Tadd Dameron and John Coltrane, all the way to Catherine's. Even the ballads sounded perky. When they came to the sign at the gate, Riche laughed. "Lovely. I'm anxious to meet this sister of yours."

"The sign's Houghton's, I'm sure. But you would like Cat."

"Yes, surely. I like all cats except the musical."

At the house, Rosalva introduced Riche to the maids who, for once, were not glued to the cable television watching *I Love Lucy*. The one calling herself Serena curtsied, then led him to the ballroom as Roz departed.

But she was not gone long. She parked the car down the serpentine drive, off to the side and in the shade of tall shrubs, where it would not be seen. She tiptoed back to the east wing, where she used her key to a side door. Removing her shoes, she carried them silently upstairs to the bedroom and locked the door behind her. The room was dark and cool.

She glanced about without focusing, ensconced herself in the wingback chair and, for the moment, felt safely enfolded. Time to collect her thoughts, to become centered. She envisioned momentarily her spiritual advisor (the Greek god incarnate), recalled the ambrosial whey shake he had blended for her (Cuisinart!), then closed her eyes, fixed her concentration six inches from the end of her nose. With calm recitation of her mantra, *alisebirac*, the kaleidoscopic patterns appeared -- rose windows of her inner eye. Gradually, the inward seething subsided, the I/thou-subject/object distinctions dissolved into incorporeal illusions, and from the calm center of her innermost non-being, she determined to get the son of a bitch. The ballroom would serve as a wide screen for the magic lantern show in which she, after changing clothes, would provide the silhouette. Sunglasses, certainly, but not the foregone red and black; better a more subdued gray and black. And this time no wig or outlandish cosmetics; only the suggestion of a hint, a trace.

In fifteen minutes she was eavesdropping the ballroom. Its French doors open, Roz positioned herself carefully in the small, intimate piano room, secreting herself behind the raised lid of the sound-board. Obliquely, she could see much of what transpired in the adjoining room, and hear nearly everything. The conversation between Riche and Nygaard was meandering, the turns surprising. They stood comfortably in the middle of the spacious room, facing the wall, silent whenever they studied the mural, then suddenly talkative. At first, Roz heard fragments only: something about Acapulco, a professor of art at Mexico City, a conga drum. One minute they were talking about one thing, the next something else. Suddenly, Roz noticed a barefoot woman, wrapped in a robe, sitting quietly in a corner, patiently watching the men move farther

along the wall. The model, she supposed -- and one who looked familiar. Where had Roz seen her?

After a little, Nygaard asked about the flap over "*Third Reich*." Riche suggested that the difficulties stemmed from his jocund quotation of Gibbon in respect of John XXIII.

"Of the Second Vatican council?" asked Nygaard. "Wait... You're talking about Gibbon. Right? Eighteenth century, wasn't he?"

"Gibbon wrote about the fifteenth century John."

"Okay. So what did he say?"

"Ah, that. Let's see: 'The most scandalous charges were suppressed; the Vicar of Christ was only accused of piracy, murder, rape, sodomy, and incest.' End quote, as I recall it."

Even with his back turned, Roz could sense Nygaard's raised brow as he drawled: "Uh-huh. I see. Wonder what the old boy really did."

Riche chuckled. "Mayhaps something serious, like misappropriation of Peter's Pence?"

The woman in the robe laughed lightly. Nygaard pivoted and smiled at her: "Eh? Like that one, do you Ann?"

Roz retreated more behind the piano. "Ann." She could not place the face, although she knew that she knew it. No figure on the wall resembled the woman, so Nygaard must have been drawing when Riche interrupted them, for there was paper on a table nearby the model, and what looked like chalk.

Riche began slowly to walk down the long stretch of figures in muted mauve, cinnabar, and burnt red. He made a comparison between the mural and the work of Balthus, but Roz failed to catch it. She was certain, however, she had yet again heard that anathema word "Arcadia."

"Come again," said Nygaard who, too, had not caught it.

"The palette of Balthus. So... why these colors in Arcadia?" Riche repeated.

"The drum's colors had symbolic value, I was told."

The drum again. And Catalan court colors. Roz knew they were back at the beginning, when she had heard only fragments. Balthus, a conga, an ex-pat... whatever.

"So that was important," ventured the model, now focused on the wall.

Seeking a summation, Nygaard paused, then shrugged: "There's more to painting than painting. I was just a kid. I didn't realize."

"Hmm. So this," said Riche, mulling the matter. "A recurso."

"What curse?" asked the model.

"Returns. Curves in upon itself." Was that Riche who answered? Roz thought it sounded like Nygaard. If so, the painter knew something about the work of the writer, after all.

"Oh, curves," said the model. "I thought it was *curse*. Curves. How's that?"

Roz smiled inwardly as Riche shook his head. "Not sure what I meant," he said.

Full circle, thought Roz. Right where she left off with (Larch, that his name?) the old fart and all that nonsense about contents of the mind. Well... her mind was racing. A good place to enter, life being theater and timing being all. So seize the moment. *Carpe momentum!*

Round the piano, she came about with the quickness of a catamaran -- neither the float nor quite the quarrelsome woman -- made a feline beeline (at the expense of mixed metaphor) toward the door of the ballroom and *boom*:

"What an epistemologist! Right there with Gide." The words ricocheted off Riche and off the wall. She stood between the jambs, a colossus. She counted silently to three, then she proclaimed that Gide claimed not to know what he had written until someone explained it to him. "Le partie de dieu," she said; then muttered: "Mon dieu."

She entered.

Nygaard's bemused face, she fancied, was a composite of *déjà vu* and annoyance at her presence. She felt his eye fall on her light gray sweater, then quickly scan the black leotards and dark glasses atop her forehead, and she relished it. She was feeling playful. In the space of a minute, she derailed their dialogue by deconstructing the binary opposition bourgeois/bohemian. The discussion was now on her terms. That was the game, as she dispensed equivocal praise at Nygaard's expense. "I like the mural as well as anything else of yours that I've seen," she said, propounding the importance of ambiguity, then offhandedly remarking Nygaard's clarity. Slash and burn, both directions; as a playful *recursio* of her own, she cited Heine-Watanabe on lengths of bourgeois forearm, but allowed that was not the problem with the mural, which was rarefied and perhaps too classical.

"Mm," said Riche. "Classical allusion violates your aesthetic, does it?"

"Allusion? No. Paintings are sign systems; texts. Intertextuality is a given"

"Well, if allusiveness is not the problem, then it's classicism itself." Riche thought a moment. "Rarefied, you said. Is that code for 'literary'? Do we mean the canon?"

Roz heard the edge to his voice, sensed his judgment that her remarks had overstepped *his* bounds of propriety, and she considered whether to rise to the bait. His smile was warm, but a challenge all the same. "Well?" he said.

Roz's irritation at being called to account, coupled with her sense of play, were about to satisfy that insatiable appetite to be center-stage. "Canons, is it? Some ancient authority?"

She confronted all of them (the goatherds!) and began to discourse in mock-earnestness:

"It was benighted, unfortunately, that so-called golden age of classical antiquity. And not because *pure presence* -- devalued in the postmodern period -- was, without any consequence, forgotten in that naive time. Rather it was because the Old Boys assumed, *determined*, a basis for discourse that failed to recognize the implications of binary opposition. Logocentrism. After Plato, no dialectician needed, for the formulation of an entire *weltanschauung*, to do much else than lift up his hand to gather the fruit of settled views. They were pleased to suppose that their dialogue was as clear as a... a fountain. A running river. But on the *marge* of their philosophy, *le copure pure* was shored-up by the Sophists, who discretely bequeathed to a more disinterested posterity the fertile skepticism of their intellectual travail. For the lofty Academy dismissed them, no doubt out of some native liberality of their enlightened minds -- and to no other end than to keep back the inclemency swirling around their Acropolis! What then? Over centuries, all discourse comes to harmonize with some Platonic reality or Aristotelian taxonomy. No truth-seeking philosopher, were he to remain in good standing, would have presumed to open a contradictory line of inquiry. The machinery of church and state, vested interest, take care of that. So your piece, '*Third Reich*,' is dead-on about that," she said directly to Riche.

Before anyone could contradict, she continued:

"So it was that canons came to be -- 'truth' and 'beauty' that precluded, even conspired against indeterminate meaning. How? With all the outlandish invention that scholastic, or even common academic idleness so curiously engenders. Angels and pinheads? On the other hand, modern anthropology had yet to recover our first mother, the goddess permeating every aspect of the tolerant and egalitarian matriarchal cultures, long denigrated and marginalized. Instead, with

sublime linearity, conceits of mind were manufactured and embellished *ad infinitum* in the form and content that had preconceived them -- how circular! -- and with the artificial contexture of logocentric discourse as reinforcement. Yet, there's still a thread in the other direction! Freud, perhaps not by reason of deceit or malice, muddled the subconscious mind with yearnings and complexes -- until the universal consciousness was no longer in right relation to reality. Dare I say, leave it to a man to erect such a cock-up as penis envy? Indeed! And hysteria? *Please*. At least theorists have exposed this secular inquisition."

She paused. Roz suddenly felt -- became aware -- she was glaring, or at least nearly so. She softened her stance, collected herself. Where was this leading? She had let emotion, the marginalized other, have its say; but now her game required the decorum of reasonableness.

"Metanalysis," she said evenly, "analysis of analyses, underlying assumptions and criteria, leads to deconstruction of evaluative judgments which, in all honesty, wander, proliferate I say, where they list. But not alone. Here, by some cranny, the parergonal enters. We come to the aporia, not Arcadia. Really, it's amazing! the determinations of our continual urgings. Liberty, intent, desire or will -- any and all, come to bare. Then we have this... this mural, in which beautiful maids traipse from vale to hill and back, their hair plaited but slightly disheveled, their retro-Vitruvian forms without any apparel that might impede the libido of the male of the species! In Arcadia, it seems everything is desire and appropriation. Well, naturally! But in a postmodern environment, no classical allusion goes unchallenged, now it's understood that truth is, at best, a logocentric labyrinth."

The enthymeme was likely too large a leap, but as the whole point was to wing it, she let fly with an afterthought: "This necessitates the advent and occupation of critical theorists, of whose ranks am I, doncha know."

This last bit was meant to be disarming, and might have been had she gone on to say: "Thanks for the entertainment; although, unknown to you, every one living is obliged by a virtual law of nature, *succes d'estime*, to favor critics." But Roz had made this long oration (which might have been excused of a drunk) owing in part to a black humor. Whether taken in seriousness or in jest, it still had been a profitable discourse considering that the model in the robe was amazed and suspended after paying attention throughout; while at the same time, both Riche and Nygaard appeared to be at a non-plus.

What a lark. Roz decided to make a final contrary turn: "Still, your mural possesses the dreamlike quality of Edwin Dickinson." Simultaneous translation: derivative! Throw a dog a bone.

Nygaard said nothing. The model in the corner said nothing.

At length, seeing that Rosalva was winding down, Riche spoke: "Don't know Dickinson. But I like it. The mural's all of a piece."

Rosalva kissed him on the jowl, as if to say "That's nice" and took his arm. *Men*, and their Platonic claptrap, she thought; 'all of a piece.' Well into their third millenium of shadows on the piss-wall.

The next few moments, though necessary to clear the air, offered little but chitchat so far as Roz was concerned. After a polite space -- that is, when enough was enough -- she tugged at Riche's arm, hauling him toward the door. "Come on, luv... We must be away." Her voice was all silken entreaty.

Chaplineseque, Riche saluted. "'Bye," he said, shrugging. "Nice to see you, Ann!" The woman in the robe waved shyly in return. "Keep painting, Thomas."

Nygaard nodded. "Thanks for coming by."

Superciliously silver screen, Roz smiled. "Ciao."

As she escorted Riche through the music room, the faint voice of the model floated after them: "Wasn't that Elana... what's her name? Idos?"

Riche had heard it, and paused. "Who's she talking about?"

"Search me," said Rosalva.

Chapter 9

After the afternoon's errands to Barclays and the consulate, they went to the apartment where the telephone was ringing.

Riche stood stock still, staring. "Eh, the telephone's ringing?"

"Just leave it." Rosalva was busily searching the coat closet by the door. The single-mindedness of the search very nearly convinced her that she was not feigning.

"Mm. Why don't you use the answering machine then?"

"Because it's probably just work calling, and I don't want to hear from anyone right now."

Anyone, she thought? Annoying how indicators of what's what insist on slipping off the tongue. Were one really thinking of work, one might have said "them."

"It could be an assignment. Something lucrative, or can't you use a little scratch?"

Roz improvised: "It's just that I have enough to do right now. And I want to spend time with you." She closed the closet door. To stop the questions, she walked over and wrapped her arms around his neck. He kissed her cheek and said:

"You see, I'm right here. There's no need to ignore your work for my sake. I'm not going off anywhere, am I."

Apparently, thought Roz. This had become a pressing problem, the prospect of someone in her private space twenty-four hours, seven days a week.

"So," he continued, breaking the embrace. "Let's just turn on the machine, shall we? No sense in shutting out the world."

No sooner than he pressed the "on" button, the telephone rang. After four rings, the outgoing message played: "This is 223-0102. Leave a message." Beep.

The voice was male and harried. "Well hello. I've been trying to reach you. We need to talk. Call me as soon as you can." Like a small death, the phone disconnected and the answering machine shut down.

"Sounds urgent," murmured Riche. "Who is it? Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"Oh, it's just Dr. Randolph," Roz said offhandedly. "He's probably got a gripe about my thesis. It can wait."

In a way, the professor *did* have a gripe about her thesis. When he last caught Roz on the fly at a wine seller's, where they met by accident, he had spoken to her forthrightly.

"I can't just up and leave her," he had pleaded. "She'll take me to the cleaners. You know how the law works here -- community property and the rest. But listen to me, please. I want to see you. I've got to see you again."

Coldly, she had observed: "It's not community property. It's equitable distribution."

He had clasped her arms. When she withdrew, he had almost achieved clarity -- a nearly noble distance -- when he said: "Sometimes I think you don't care for me at all. You only see me because of the thesis. Isn't that right?" Had he only said, "Well, fuck that" and walked away. But he had not, and he remained susceptible of her opaque equivocations.

"It's more than that," Roz had demurred, without elaboration sufficient to forestall further action.

It *was* more than that. Randolph was still indispensable, and not just because he was a reader on the committee. The thesis was about institutional practices, a comparison of the Late Victorians with contemporary academe. It was about relations of power... and everything else! The thesis was the starting point of her unified field theory. Of course, certain data could not be presented in the current research and would have to wait for the writings to follow. It was here the good doctor entered, where all of them entered: the committee, the alternates, Nygaard... and Riche, too. It made her head spin, as she saw it coming together. For the whole bloody combine, theory was the anodyne, the critical purge, even the *scourge*. Hey, what of another pen name? Why not Attilla, feminized to atticism?

She, Rosalva Caribe y Sila (yes, she was contemplating a legal change from "Stein," her father's family name, to that of her mother's), thought of the practice of theory as something radical, something heady and sexual in its deconstructive procedure. She was an advocate of the New Historicism, applying its methodologies to anything that came under her hand. Just now, that involved the reception of English literature as a new curriculum in Victorian England.

There were debates in Parliament, whether to allow women into Camford (she did not like the sound of Oxbridge) and other august institutions. What would they study? As women had not the requisite intellectual capacity necessary to the pursuit of Latin, medicine, mathematics, or physics, the university curriculum would have to be changed to accommodate their admittance to the halls of higher learning. Happily, English literature was advanced as a "soft subject" suitable to the feminine temperament. Not only women might profitably study the new curriculum, but also those third-rate males who would become schoolmasters in the countryside. The goal was full employment, but also to quell some of the anarchistic tensions that led to riots in the streets, bomb-threats at the Observatory, and a series of grisly murders in White Chapel. Years later, in the aftermath of the Second World War, similar issues were debated on the floor of Congress, as the best and brightest argued whether the common man had enough intellectual capacity to justify funding the GI Bill. Did Dr. Randolph understand that this had been the crack in the door at the portals of academia, that without the GI Bill and what followed in its train, he would more than likely never have had a chance? The cards were previously stacked against anyone of his social standing and background. And those same cards are dealt women who ante up for institutional Spanish monte.

Oh, or rather whew! the thoughts, associations, recollections of a par-second! Make that a nano-second. Black holes in the continuum of time. The human mind was simply extraordinary, even if a pat of butter were nowhere melting over Mr. Proust's toast. Too, it was remarkable that she should recall such clear details of what ran through her mind when Randolph had honed upon her thesis as the reason for her favors. Quack, quack, quack. He was often very like a duck, the goose.

"Such a procrastinator. I trust you don't treat *my* messages in this manner."

Riche's remark jerked Roz into the present moment. "You'll never really know," she said disarmingly.

"No, I suppose not."

Roz collected her thoughts. "Hey, would you mind? I forgot to check the mailbox on the way up. Must be a stack of bills by now. If you get mail, I'll pour wine."

"Done. Need a key?"

"It's here, in the lamp table drawer." She retrieved the key and handed it to him, making sure her fingertips grazed his palm suggestively.

"Don't start without me."

When she was alone, she surveyed the apartment, making measurements and rearranging things in her mind's eye. Why? Nothing would be moved. There was not even room for the bulk of his clothes in her closet. It would not, could not, work. As a belletrist, the necessary condition was a dignified distance from one's subject; as a critical subject (that is, her theoretical self), the postmodern condition presupposed identification with the object (her Nobel nominee). But not at such cramped close quarters; surely not! How would one breathe, much less move? It would be impossible to carry on research with some mouse having the run of the laboratory. She would have to put him off, to postpone at the very least.

"June, I'm home!" Riche said this as he came melodiously through the door. Another European guest enjoyed referencing the banality of 'classic' American television programming. Or so Roz noted. "You have a postcard from Tuscany."

He handed Rosalva a stamped, dog-eared, 5 x 7 slick stock reproduction of a fresco at the ducal palace in Mantua. Mantua? She read the breezy script:

Dear Rose, the experience of art is like increase nature; valid on its own terms! And the reality of Michelangelo -- I want a ceiling fresco! J Or maybe white horses. Just rode through a vineyard, followed by a wine tasting. Love this Pisanello, huh? Can't wait to see the portrait. Maybe soon. Ciao! xxxooo Cat

Roz interpreted the signs. Florence, Rome, Mantua; Catherine's point was to show, by implication, how much fun she was having in her Italian romp. And the fresco! Wait 'til she sees her ballroom, which, in fact, now had a white horse. If only Cat would take a painted horse in lieu of a real horse.

"So what about our wine?"

"Oh!" said Roz, putting down the card. "Forgot completely. Is that all the mail?"

"That's the lot, I'm afraid. Hate to disappoint, but *no bills for you* today."

"All the more reason for wine. A little celebration." She moved toward the kitchen.

Riche followed. "Oh yes, there's something I forgot to mention."

"What's that?" She selected a bottle from the small oaken rack next the toaster, then opened the overhead cupboard.

He stood in the doorway, holding back the glass-beaded curtain. "Silly of me, really; but then, you must already know. Actually, I'm surprised *you* haven't said anything about it."

"About what?"

"The lawn party."

"Lawn party?"

"Mm. Then you don't know? Thomas has again invited me to the house, this time to a sort of... I dunno... afternoon buffet. It's in connection with his gallery, I'm told."

"His gallery?" She placed two glasses carefully down upon the counter. Giving a party did not sound anything at all like the reclusive painter. She would have to investigate. Or maybe just play it as it lays. "I guess I know nothing about that."

"Will you go?"

"Hm," she snorted. "Just when is this little do?"

Chapter 10

Phraseology was all. It was not a lie and not really a misrepresentation; a misdirection perhaps, but only owing to a change of heart. Roz had made a statement of what one could do, perhaps should do, while knowing one would likely not do it. She had told Riche she needed to visit the Sunnyvale campus and that the trip might take a couple days. At the last minute (and without informing Riche, since there was no point in troubling him), she had decided not to go. (Close mental compartment.) The effect of this change of heart was to forestall his change of address and to purchase a little time in which to maneuver.

She finished the third installment of her series in *So-Bart Arts* at the magazine's office, a renovated pawnshop on Ffrench Circle. She breezed in, pulled a floppy disk from her purse, and sat down at a proofreader's computer. She worked straight through lunch. In the end, the article was not so subtly sarcastic as she would have liked, but the deadline was several days past and what was done would do. She was relieved to have it out of the way. Now, she only needed to observe a noted someone's reaction to it at close quarters – not for the current project, of course, but for the book to follow. (Close mental compartment.)

When her thoughts turned to the committee, she drove to the computer center; but it was packed, not a terminal free. As there was no point in wasting time, electronic messaging could wait. Not to worry – her mentor was managing things, anyway. (Close mental compartment.)

That evening, she dined alone in a small Greek restaurant downtown. A waiter brought her a liquor flavored with aniseed, courtesy of the gentleman at that table, there. She did not like ouzo, with its aftertaste of turpentine; nor did she consider the gentleman, a gray eminence, worth engaging. Little could she guess, after assuming that he found her attractive, that he had sent a deliberate sign (he did not send pernod or anisette). Little did she know that he knew much about her – who she was, is, could be – or that, in a very few weeks, she would have to deal with this gray immanence directly, and in regard to a personal matter of some delicacy. She nodded to him, placed the ouzo aside, and ignored him altogether. Later, as she paid the check, she glanced furtively toward his table, which had been cleared. He was already gone.

Her thoughts turned to the next step – namely, to cover her tracks. There were personal items in the apartment and in her room at Catherine's house that needed to be... relocated. All these were in constant use. That was the difficulty – how to hide them yet keep them handy –

especially with the items in the apartment. A hatbox secreted under the bed and an additional locker at the Greyhound station would have to serve for the short run. Then there was protective coloration and a couple manuscripts in Cat's big house. No problem. The best time to remove these, she decided, was as soon as possible – that is, during the lawn party when, presumably, everyone would be outside, water-side. (Keep compartment open.)

So it happened that, the following afternoon, Rosalva's car was once again parked along the serpentine drive, sequestered behind a stand of poplars well back from the many guests' cars. Satisfied, she disembarked, circled around, and from the trunk of her car removed a small attache case. She stole up to the house, avoiding the crunch of gravel by keeping to the marge of the drive. A passing cloud, the only white puff in a dome of brilliant blue, put her momentarily in shadow.

Near the side entrance was a vehicle sporting a logo for *Javier's*. Catered, she thought; the *whatever-is-happening* is catered. In the distance, she heard resonant thumps, a woman's delighted scream, the encouragement of male cheers, followed by a chorus of "oh!" -- then a boisterous proclamation, "Seven-six." Then more thumps, more cheers.

At the front door was a note in felt marker reading "Come around back" with an emphatic arrow pointing to the left. Gingerly, she turned the handle and stepped inside. A fly buzzed after her, straight through the ajar door from the anteroom to the front room, zoomed across the space and smacked itself against the great glass overlooking the lake. It was quite a thump. For all the warm noise outside, the house inside was coolly quiet.

Now came the bit she liked best. Like a character in a psycho-thriller, Roz peered into the spare space. From the kitchen she heard the opening of a cupboard, then the solid thump (it was a day for thumps, she decided) of something almost certainly ceramic set forcibly down upon the sink board. The sound betrayed irritability.

After a little, water began to boil. She strained to see but could not, without revealing her presence, make out who was within.

She slowly withdrew.

There came more sounds: a refrigerator door, a spoon stirring, clink clink clink, against the side of a cup; then an aroma of instant espresso wafted by. She nearly sneezed.

She placed a finger under her nose and concentrated upon breathing. Better to sneeze upstairs, behind a closed door. With all the stealth she could muster, she slipped toward the stair and its silent ascent. She was midway up the first flight when a subzero voice froze her:

"Dr. Idos, I presume." It was Nygaard.

Stiffly, Roz turned and in a controlled tone said: "Who?"

"Elana Idos."

"What about her."

"Isn't it."

Dress it up however one will, her surprise was complete. But at least she no longer felt the need to sneeze. Stupidly, she could only think to repeat: "Isn't it what?"

With a scornful, weirdly metronomic rhythm, Nygaard said: "You are she is you."

Roz struggled to regain composure. In the same moment, she felt the old duality – the considered recklessness, the lucid abandon – of hot arousal. No doubt about it, she was a fine precision instrument.

"Interesting locution," she cracked, her poles charged and arcing. "Right there with 'a rose is a rose.'" Staring down at him, she sighed arrogantly. "You seem... to have assumed something." Purposefully, she descended, placed her case on a chair, her hands on her hips.

It was long seconds before Nygaard said: "I see. My mistake. You just happen to have a manuscript by Elana Idos. A manuscript in progress."

That was a bolt from the blue. "You bastard! You went through my things."

"So then a rose is a rose is a rose." He put down the mug, crossed the kitchen's threshold, closed the space between them. Glowering, he paced back and forth in a convincing display of the readily predatory about to pounce.

Roz's jaw tightened. "What of it. More to the point is for you to answer what you were doing, going through my things."

He spoke directly into her face: "I think you wanted me to go through your *things*. Huh? Wanted someone to discover..."

"Oh, is that it. *Discover*? Is that what you call it? Discover what."

"Just how clever you think you are."

"And how clever is that?"

He barely suppressed a smile.

Infuriated, she determined not to play his way. Otherwise, one would have read Sun Tzu for nothing. She relaxed her posture. "Look. I *told* you I am doing *research*."

"On the alternates."

"Right."

"Anything else?"

"Their milieu. I *told* you that."

"Their relation to the establishment, you said."

"The So-Bart, and everything that goes with it."

Radiating dark anger, he sneered: "Undercover work. Right?" His image of her turned to black disdain in the actinism of an accomplished Italian gesture. He waved her off with extended middle index, an agitator in search of solution, and turned toward the ballroom.

Reflexively, she pursued him. She caught up just as he threw open the French doors and abruptly turned, seething, to face her: "This is all one big game for you, isn't it? An elaborate joke. Unless researchers ordinarily sleep with subjects. What *is* that, anyway? Field work? The collection of *data*?"

"You didn't seem to mind." With that, she scored. It was written all over his face. So, to press the advantage, in a sing-song voice she needled him further: "Oh now, don't let's tell me... you got hurt."

"That's not the point." He stomped into the ballroom. She was right at his heels.

"No, that *is* the point. Don't try booking me some middle-class guilt trip. I'm beyond all that binary, logocentric good-and-evil clap-trap. It just doesn't play."

"Play? *Jeu*? Is that it? How postmodern. And what of Riche?"

What, thought Roz – had he re-evaluated and slipped through her position to attack? Had he read Sun Tzu? "That's something else. Another matter."

"I see. Another compartment. Just another project."

"More than just that. Some people think he's a major writer. Or don't you read. Besides, we go back. I know him, okay? He's a hopeless romantic, and that makes him interesting. Lord, how anyone could sustain that at this point in time! I mean, the guy actually thinks he's going to take me away from all this. Rescue poor little me."

"And that's such great fun."

Roz caught her breath and laughed coolly. "It has entertainment value, yes."

"Slash and burn. Scorched earth. Who the hell are you?"

"*Who am I?* Well let's see." She stood stock still, planted to the parquet. "For starters, I'm not some self-deluded bourgeois smearing his precious little ego all over a wall. Did I say little? On a wall that size?" With open palm she gestured toward the mural, as though others – friends, Romans, and countrymen -- were present as witnesses. "Just look at it. And then look at yourself."

"And?"

"You're too self-absorbed to notice painting is dead! But as no one in So-Bart seems to know that, you're not alone there. But *look* at you. You're not even a modernist, much less a postmodernist. You don't have a clue. *Who am I?* What a dilemma. Shit! *What are you?* Now there's a question for the age of mechanical reproduction. It's ludicrous. You're in another time zone. Completely irrelevant."

Nygaard stared at her. "So why don't you tell me.. no, everyone... what you *really* think. You and Elana Idos. Or is it Rose Alisebirac? Whatever name you're hiding behind. Scribble, scribble, scribble. Rosalva Sila y Caribe... You know, that's really just too perfect. Even for a fire-breathing bitch with symmetrical tits."

In a white heat, Roz's voice went bizarrely preternatural: "Well don't stop now; you're on a roll! Come on; be honest! You loved it! You actually want me to say how easy it was to read the signs of an oral fixation? Heart's desire, baby."

"Oh, I see. Now we're no longer Elana Idos, we're Herr Doktor Freud."

With pure rancor, Roz screamed: "Fuck you."

Nygaard laughed. "Sounds better than fucking you."

"Oh does it? Let's just see about that." Grabbing his shirt, she pulled him close enough to kiss fully on the mouth. Fiercely, she probed with her tongue, felt his body stiffen. In return, he kissed her savagely. In competition? In desperation? O, it hardly mattered. She fumbled for his hand and placed it upon her breast. Then she went for the marked contrast: her body yielded; her mouth softened. She put her arms around his neck.

He hesitated, resisted, pulled her arms down. "That other manuscript," he gasped. "That's it, isn't it." He held her arms to her sides.

So, thought Roz, we are still struggling. "What other manuscript?" Again she tried to kiss him.

He turned his face away, avoiding her lips. "The review of Riche."

She felt a sharp twinge in the center of her back. "Oh, now that's very good."

"*You* are Matthew Quintal."

Surely she looked aghast. "You're barmy! Positively potty!"

She was improvising counter measures when suddenly, somehow, she sensed a foreign presence. She spun violently, gasped "Houhh!" and pushed Nygaard away. There, in the recital room, just inside the door, stood Riche. Beside him were the gallery people Roz had lately seen everywhere. And a fourth, whom she did not know, was standing near the piano.

There was no place to hide.

Who would have surmised, with an enthusiastic gaggle of the upwardly mobile enjoying drinks on the lawn in this serenely sunny afternoon of bonhomie, open bar, ample buffet and

volleyball, that Riche would mention the mural to an old friend just arrived at the *Hotel Mistral*. However, the opportunistic host, Mr. Howard Rumpman, was expecting to see the portrait commissioned for Mrs. Houghton Moorland. Unveiling it was half the reason for the lakeside extravaganza -- that, and to celebrate his gallery's lucrative year. But Riche had insisted: "It's rather more than a portrait!" That had piqued curiosity. To the ballroom he led Rumpman, his leggy assistant, and the old friend, a lighthearted entourage that now, massively befuddled, stood stolidly and stared.

The silence was excruciating. The old friend was the first to turn away; then Rumpman; then his assistant. Then Nygaard, shaking his head, turned, walked slowly to the corner and sat on a chair. It was the same chair, Roz noted, where his model had been sitting what seemed but a blink ago. What an odd thing to recall.

Roz could not know how much was seen or heard but, from Riche's pained expression, any explanation or attempt to control damage was highly unlikely to succeed. Nevertheless, she remained undaunted and never-say-die. Positive traits, to be sure; so she persisted:

"This is not what it looks like."

That evening, the banner-embazoned *So-Bart Arts* hit the streets with a third installment of a series by the intrepid Elana Idos. Featured was *The Sequacious Riche In So-Bart*, an essay comparing (extolling) the district's outcast but creative alternates with the university's renowned but over-rated artist-in-residence. It was an axe job of the tenor, 'Nobel nominee, one's arse.'

Basically.

Chapter 11

Summer turned to September as Catherine returned from Tuscany a little earlier than expected. Certainly she noticed the mural in the ballroom straight away. She learned about the party while unpacking her bags; then she spoke with neighbors who said the party had broken up owing to a tumult that ended when police were summoned. She listened patiently to the maids; she telephoned *Gallery Rumpman* in regard to their artist; and she telephoned *Javier's* to speak with the caterers. As for her hubby, Houghton Moorland merely surveyed his new sailboat for damage from the blowout. That was their first day back at the lake.

The next day, having sorted the facts to her satisfaction, Catherine requested Rose to remove her things from the house. This was done with controlled vehemence, from a sense of violation following initial disbelief, after listening to her sister's side of the story.

Roz did not gracefully own Catherine's criticism that she had been careless, even cavalier, in her discharge of duty. Nevertheless, Catherine would not have dismissed her, if Rose had not gleefully relayed something overheard at the party.

What annoyed Catherine was little sister's manner in releasing the juicily catalytic tidbit. What Rosalva said led to the inexorable hire of a private investigator. It ignited another blowout, only this time between the Moorlands, and just as Houghton was leaving on business for Hong Kong and Macao. Then came lawyers. And yes, Catherine later deposed, it was she herself,

unfortunately, who had advertised for domestic help at Moorland's suggestion. He, bless helpful him, had handled the personal interviews and the process of selection.

Catherine became a stoic. She told her closest friends that, at the very least, unfavorable publicity spelled her name correctly while linking it with a past nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Everyone relaxed in appreciation of her good humor.

Good humor was needed. *So-Bart Arts* was soon to publish the fourth installment in a series that attracted an unusually wide readership of those with a forensic interest in the fine arts. "*Against the Wall: A Magic Lantern Show of the Primal Repressed*" was about the local painter Thomas Nygaard, his commission to paint a portrait of Catherine, and, of course, the unwanted mural. It abstracted pleadings in *Moorland vs Gallery Rumpman* as well as *In re Marriage of Moorland*. It read like an insider's perspective, Catherine smilingly noted, especially the gossip about the arts patron and his maids.

These things happened with surrealistic speed, after the opaque news from London.

Part Three : Autumn

Chapter 12

Within a week of Riche's departure, local papers carried the few sketchy details supplied by Reuters in the form of a notice much like the peristaltic reportage of perestroika, glasnost and other developments in Moscow that had first passed through a conduit of beady-eyed redactors. Only the funeral arrangements seemed clear and certain.

The facts were these: after a lecture tour in the United States, L'Gardinier Riche had returned to London in haste by indirect route. Before departing JFK (or perhaps from a terminal in Heathrow), he had made contact with his editor by telex (apparently mislaid), or by telephone (no record existed), then failed to keep their appointment (dutifully inscribed). Repeated calls to Riche's flat went unanswered. When the editor paid a personal visit, the building's supervisor discovered the body – or did not, in which case a team of paramedics or police pushed open the door (strangely unlocked). A police coroner placed the time of death between 24 and 72 hours. A passing mention of the Nobel nomination ("Undeserved, yet lesser lights have received the award"), guarded commentary on recent controversies ("Mind you, that essay was a lightning rod"), statements from friends ("He had few intimates"), and assessments by colleagues ("His standing? Interesting question, that") and the critic Matthew Quintal ("Mr. Riche is unlikely to find repose in Poets Corner"), were followed by a brief biography. Officially, on 13 September, it was 'death by misadventure'. Two days later, the news hit *So-Bart*. In the same issue, Reuters reported that decorations and citations among the 1,250 armed men and two Ranger battalions who had participated in the invasion of Grenada now totaled in excess of 19,000.

That afternoon, it rained books in the running brooks of the gutter on Barton Boulevard, where Roz found an FTD Winged Mercury and, to make an end (closure, she called it) wired an

assortment of roses to the funeral parlor in West End – anonymous blooms from an ardent admirer.

Navigable rivulets on windowpanes; droplets to the sash, splash. Roz wrote resumes. The thing about a *vita* was, it forced one to reflect, to rethink one's existence in terms of paper stock and typeface. She needed to collect her thoughts, to get organized. A short list of Ivy League schools would receive her professional resume and unimpeachable personal references, her ducks in a row. Out the window, who could be sure whether the weather would hold? It might rain, even snow, but most days it looked like Indian Summer (that loathsome incorrect nomenclature). And polyunsaturated fats – her diet, too, needed rethinking. And she would resume her regimen of morning yoga. Then there was "*Trouble in Arcadia*," which extended the series in *So-Bart Arts*. Meanwhile, Bix Tzara called to offer his condolence. There had been no photograph accompanying the obituary, he noted. (For the record, Roz had Polaroid snapshots from Guadalajara. It would be an illustrated book.) After Tzara's long call, she reconnected the answering machine. The resume, she decided, would go also to private liberal arts colleges, not just major Midwestern universities. Tossed salad sounded just the ticket. The first call to which the activated machine answered was from the front desk of the *Herald*. A story was breaking at City University, where, apparently, a graduate student had been attacked. Please get on it.

The distraction was welcome and Roz seized the moment. No more circling on station. She pulled the box from under the bed – no reason to hide anything now – selected protective coloration and dressed. How leotards always felt like new skin and a jet-black wig exhilarating! She applied artifice to her appearance, gathered pen, pad, and sunglasses – then slipped down the fire escape to her car. Charged, decks cleared and ready for engagement, she turned the key, the engine roared. If only there were underground parking, to amplify the screech as she sped away.

First call was administration annex with its office of the registrar. She flashed her press card to a subdued secretary who, dilatory, closed file cabinets of gunmetal gray. Another looked up from her fruit-on-the-bottom yoghurt to say they were not at liberty to say.

Roz went next to the graduate school, where she was given the name of Ann Vandercleef, a student of French literature. On the way out, a stooped sweeper, who had overheard the inquiry and knew Ann, stayed Roz to say what a nice, nice person.

At the campus police station, two beefy officers sat upon opposite corners of the same desk, sketching a story for the reporter with the full, red lips and shapely legs.

"Yeah, it appears they knew each other. Would you like some coffee?" Officer One was considerate during ocular strip-searches. And his guttural speech had a peculiar rhythm: "There's raw, Sugar, 'n' half-'n'-half."

"Thanks, but I'm coffee'd-out. So – what can you tell me about her attacker?"

"Third-year student," said Officer Two. "A real loser. Dropped out of the art department. Can you beat that? I mean, we're not talkin' rocket science here. So sometimes Miss, I'm sorry, Ms Vandercleef was seen walkin' with him around campus. But, so far as we know, there was no relationship."

"Yeah, lotsa personal... problems... and he dropped out. Last term."

"Mm." Roz jotted a note. "So what's the kid been doing since?"

Officer Two reached for a clipboard and leafed perfunctorily through notes, as if deciding what was pertinent and what was not. But it was Officer One who began to relay the facts. In his strange, deliberate cadence, he said the dropout worked for the university. He had a job through the extension office, a part-time position cleaning stalls at a gymkhana south of town.

Everyone said he was quiet but likeable. No problem at all, until one day he was stopped for a minor traffic violation, at which time the officer at the scene noticed a roach clip in the ashtray. This led to a search of the suspect's apartment, which in turn led to his eviction. He was evicted from a second apartment shortly thereafter. By this time, he had withdrawn from the painting department, but without first making arrangements with professors for a grade of incomplete. About this same time, his mother came to stay. An alcoholic, she had been ensconced in a trailer park outside Tucson, Arizona until arrears of rent sent her here. Of course, the suspect was by now sleeping in a room at a downtown hotel, where he paid by the week.

Some painting students say he "hung out" at the studios. This seemed an exaggeration, because others described him coming by only once or twice. Mostly he was seen walking across campus, usually alone, but sometimes with the victim, who sometimes bought him lunch. He reciprocated with small drawings sent to her university postal box. There was no evidence that she wrote in return. It was known that he developed an attachment for her, and would talk with her at length about personal problems. Otherwise, he had some run-ins with the art crowd in *So-Bart*, where he tried to get his work into a cooperative gallery.

Friends say that they cautioned Ms Vandercleef, but that she maintained he was lonely, not dangerous. She also said he had talent, and that interested her. Apparently, Ms Vandercleef did not attend classes the day of the attack, when classmates said they saw the suspect sitting on a retaining wall outside the Humanities Building. He was described as "agitated." Perhaps he and Ms Vandercleef had an appointment that she failed to keep.

The young man was now in the county's detention facility. He had been evaluated, a public defender had been provided, and an arraignment had been scheduled.

To this point, the officers had offered facts like cold cuts on an iron platter. But the mood changed, as they began to speculate.

"He's textbook stuff. Like, what we studied at... the Academy."

"Yeah. Just like that Hinckley. You know, psychotic – schizophrenia, stemming from a severe depressive disorder, but..."

"But no overt evidence," interrupted Officer One, "of... significant abnormality. Until one day, he just... *boom!* He goes over. The edge." Looking down at the floor, he murmured: "But for the grace of God..."

"Junk food, alcohol, pills. The usual."

"Flipped out."

"That girl, Ms Vandercleef. A real beauty. Of course, now she's... Not that it makes any difference, you understand. A victim's a victim."

Officer One shook his head. "It's a bummer."

"Ain't life a bitch? I gotta tell ya, it's like some are just born under an angry star."

"Sure seems like. He's one o' those guys... that'll never. Get his act together."

"Nope, probably never will."

"Well," said Roz with emphatic finality, "thank you, gentlemen."

Officer Two rose from the desk. "No prob."

"Anytime," smiled Officer One, "at all."

On the way out, Roz noticed a smart arrangement of photographs hanging neatly on the wall. The first showed two anxious faces calling a coin-toss in the 1975 High School Football Championship. In the next, these two faces were encircled in blue ink among a combat unit deployed upon bleachers. The third was an action shot of the invasion force sent to rescue medical students from a small Caribbean island, in the very moment of coming ashore. The final

photo showed the same individuals, Corporals One and Two, in full military regalia, during a formal presentation.

How many medals, Roz wondered, did they receive. "You two go back a ways, I see."

Officer Two nodded. "Yup, we're a team I guess. My old man would say we practically pee out o' the same dick. But then, my old man's from another time. Nobody can say anything like that now."

"Yes," Roz allowed, closing the door behind her. "Things have changed."

It was much too much. *The Herald*, she knew, wanted warmth. *Ipsa facto*, any "human interest" story required "the personal touch" – the subject seen from various angles; a personality with facets such as Picasso might have written were he as good a writer as Braque, or merely a better writer than *Desire Caught by the Tail*.

Having decided to locate classmates and professors, Roz returned to the graduate school to procure the victim's class schedule, then made the round of lectures and seminars. Everyone was discussing the incident. Several were willing to be interviewed but, in terms of sustaining interest, their remarks were problematic. A uniformly gooey sentiment was fast congealing into sentimentality. "She always put others first" was one commonplace. It was particularly irritating and banal, as Roz fleshed-out the facts regarding St. Ann and assessed the difficulties presented by any portrait of the bungled and botched, with all the usual weaknesses glossed as cardinal virtues. Roz sought pizzazz. Once again, she rued, form would inevitably control content, as "human interest" led to an apotheosis of the humdrum rank and file.

What could anyone possibly write about Ann Vandercleef? That her full name was Anna Rose? That she was brainy but kind? Where was the angle?

Someone mentioned Ann's involvement with volunteer work – a commitment really – and that she had passed on opportunities for advancement in order to help others. This angle (the Do-gooder Supreme), Roz did not pursue.

It was all quite trite. Professors liked her, fellow students liked her. Nothing got Roz's juices flowing until she was approached by a bearded, serious-looking young man who said that he had photographed Ann. No, he answered, smiling -- no nudes, unfortunately. Inexplicably, Roz felt challenged when this film major said that Ann reminded him not so much of the Nordic beauties in *Olympiad* as of the young Leni Riefenstahl herself.

"She was surprisingly shy. I dunno," he admitted. "She had absolutely no idea the effect she had on dudes like me. She wasn't manipulative. You know what I mean? She didn't *use* her looks." This encapsulation had tweaked Roz; but it was tolerable in the end. When he asked if *she* would consider posing, she flatly turned him down.

On the whole, nothing she learned about the victim interested her until someone said she was tending bar part-time. That, thought Roz, might be an angle. Then someone spoke of Ann's love for the troubadours and trouveres, and that she enjoyed pieces by Adam de la Halle. "Isn't that romantic?" It would have been another complete wash, except that this same informant (who, Roz determined, knew Ann better than the others) also mentioned her love of art – "no talent, just appreciation" – and that Ann herself had recently discussed modeling for a painter. Then came the magic words: "Some guy in *So-Bart*, I think she said."

Roz's ears fairly stung. Why had she not realized sooner? She searched her memory as though reviewing a carousel of slides in a projector.

Click. Opening night, at *Uni-Prof*s. Click. The model in the ballroom. The connection with Nygaard became immediately apparent. O, fortune's child – such unbelievably good luck – the planets were aligning, she understood parallax, she had an angle on the alternates, Nygaard, and now the camp follower, Ann.

The remaining facts were tragically anticlimactic ("What else should one expect, taking in strays?") – except for a single saving ironic detail. The night of the attack, the library had closed at midnight. After returning books, Ann had made her way across campus. It was a starry night. Alone, she was attacked from behind. No purse was found, and no wallet – only a photocopy of an article on L'Gardinier Riche.

It was all coming together – another special feature for *Arts & Entertainment*.

Chapter 13

"All rise."

The acrimony between Astrid Guelph and Liana Ghibelline became distant thunder when their tortious bolts grounded in district court. The sensible judge took judicial notice of free speech in matters of opinion, ruled that both parties failed to prove damages; then, with prejudice, dismissed their petitions as frivolous. In an aside to his bailiff and court reporter, the jurist magisterially observed: "If only there were more bench trials instead of wasting time with juries."

It took five minutes. Those summoned as witnesses for *both* petitioner *and* respondent, namely two representatives of *Outre Other*, together with Drs. Biederbeck Tzara, Nick Ropoliz, Warren Randolph III, Barnett Neale, and Ms. Rosalva Stein, were noticeably relieved to be so expeditiously released from the maze of claims and counterclaims.

Opposing lawyers, exhausted from rigorous display in behalf of their respective clients (who did not deign to appear), shook hands and departed for a leisurely late breakfast at the country club, where they played the back nine before calling it a day.

"Didn't even have to play our Get-out-of-Jail-Free cards," said Randolph to Ms Stein. He was the only man she knew who could say something inane, yet think he had got off a good one. In her charitable moments, it seemed charming; a form of naivete, in a way.

Roz smiled and excused herself, going out the courtroom's great walnut doors to have a look at the docket. It could be useful, she thought, to sit through the arraignment. The feature in *Arts & Entertainment* was well received and had generated interest enough to justify a follow-up. But there was an immediate glitch: the arraignment was scheduled for the same morning as *In Re Marriage of Moorland*. In fact, one immediately followed the other. The risk of encountering Catherine (or Houghton, too, for that matter) was virtually assured – in which case, protective coloration would prove useless, even ludicrous. Neither Elana Idos nor any other incarnation could pass through these halls on that day and remain safely undiscovered.

This acquiescent meditation was abruptly interrupted when the walnut doors were shoved open in a huff, and Dr. Bix Tzara appeared. He looked bewildered. When he saw Roz, he fairly cried out: "It makes no sense! Okay, so he's tired of reading sagas and lais! He wants adventure! Before the sands run out! Before time passes him by! Right!"

Tzara was completely exasperated.

"What's wrong, Bix?"

"So I ask him, *why her*? And you know what he says? 'Whenever Sunshine showed late for class, the boys in the back were snickering.' Well, that's Barney of Blarney all over, ain't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Barney, of course! Dr. Neale."

"So what's the problem?"

"He just told me the craziest.... I can't believe it. What in hell is going on? Is everyone just..."

Roz insisted: "What are you talking about?"

"...nuts? Am I the only adult here? It's like dealing with some kid!"

"Who is like dealing with some kid?"

"Barney! Dr. Neale."

Composed, Roz said: "I think you need to be a little more clear about this, Bix."

He took a deep breath. "All right, all right. You're right."

At that moment, the heavy, brass-handled double doors opened wide. Roz and Tzara turned to meet their colleagues exiting the courtroom, a light-hearted processional. Dr. Ropoliz had an arm around Dr. Neale's shoulder, and the two were laughing. Dr. Randolph followed on their heels, smiling sheepishly. He cast a glance at Roz, shrugged and feigned a grimace. When Ropoliz saw Tzara, he said: "Ah, Bix! Then we'll be meeting about this matter soon, I take it?"

"Yes, yes," said Tzara impatiently. "I'll try to schedule something within the next couple of days."

"Very well. Just let me know. It's a light week, so there shouldn't be any problem coming down."

"Me, too," said Randolph, "although Friday afternoon might be best." He was thinking (a self-help book called it 'imaging') of later, that Friday evening, with Roz, in her apartment – and he felt certain she would need, might even require, assurance, consolation, understanding, and a jolly rogering.

"So nice to see you, Rosalva, as always," Ropoliz smiled warmly. "The manuscript looks great. Check your electronic mail. I'll write."

Randolph waved wanly. "So will I."

"I'll be in touch," said Dr. Neale to Tzara. "Have a nice day."

Tzara nodded. He said nothing as he watched them saunter away. Their footfalls and bonhomie echoed down the corridor, then dissipated as the procession turned left at the stairwell.

"I can't believe it." Tzara began massaging his temples.

"Bix, will you please tell me what's going on?" Roz was now coolly contained. She was beginning to have suspicions that Dr. Neale was disapproving of some aspect of her thesis, now, rather late in the proverbial day. "There's a problem with my dissertation, is that it?"

"Dissertation? Oh. Nes and yo. Well, no. I mean, yes and no."

"Yes and no?"

"No, because he hasn't read it. Yes, because his resignation has been accepted. That's the good news."

"What?"

"You heard me. He was relieved of his duties – placed on probation by the Dean. So what does he do? He ups and resigns!"

Roz was flabbergasted. Stunned. She tried to speak and sputtered. Then she stuttered:

"D-d'you mean he's..."

"Gone. Gone, gone, gone."

"Gone?" repeated Roz. "I don't understand..."

"Not only *that*, he's leaving his wife."

"Wait a minute! Back up! I can't... *process*. You'd better... You've got to *explain* all this, please."

"I didn't get the news until this morning, did I. Barney's at another campus, so how was *I* to know? Unless someone *told* me – which he did, of course, only just this morning. Jesus, what a mess! I suppose one should thank Astrid and Liana for suing each other, otherwise I wouldn't ever know anything at all!"

Tzara looked unsteady. Roz took his arm: "Let's sit down over here." She steered him toward a low bench against the wall. "All right. So tell me what happened."

"I need some water first." Tzara shuffled tiredly to a fountain and bent over the fixture. When he turned the handle, a strong jet spurted into his face. Then it dropped to a trickle. As he was disinclined to suck the fixture, he returned to the bench and plopped down. He wiped his face with a monogrammed handkerchief.

"Where to start?" he began. "Sunshine, I suppose. Barney has a student named Sunshine. She often comes late to class. So, one day the discussion is about Marie de France and one of the *lais*. I'm sure you've already guessed the various permutations presented by such a phonological specimen. So, as night follows day, Barney hears one of the guys say something about 'Dr. Neale's lay', as in *main squeeze*, just as Sunshine is coming into class. You wouldn't expect something like this to happen in 1987, would you?"

"Something like *what*? A bad joke? Chauvinism?"

"No, no. There's more. Barney says Sunshine's well endowed, so when she slides onto a desk, it's an easy eyeful and guys often snicker..."

"Yeah, well..."

"...but this time someone said '*Cherchez au pair!*' – or something like that. Then another said, 'The brace that launched a thousand quips' – so, it's a literature class, after all. Anyway, our Barney starts feeling protective. All those years of chivalrous romances, one supposes. So what does he do? Now don't forget, this is Dr. Barnett Neale we're talking about. He throws a punch! A clean right lead. At least, that's the gallant's tale. You can guess the rest."

"Complaint to the Dean."

"Of course."

"Suspension, pending inquiry."

"Yes."

"Possible law suit."

"Most likely."

"Mm." Roz thought a moment. "All right. But he wasn't dismissed yet."

"No; he's got tenure. He resigned."

"*Why?*"

"That was my question. You know his answer? He's in love. Sunshine thinks he's wonderful. A hero or something."

"Oh, please! You're kidding!"

"Would that I were. Barney says it was the push he's needed. Married all these years. Spoiled kids. Bored out of his mind. All that keeps him home is habit, he says. Poor Martha."

"Poor Martha?" exclaimed Roz (thinking 'Poor me, you mean').

"His wife of twenty-five years. Twenty-five years! *Pfffft*. Just like that."

Roz drove Dr. Tzara to the campus. When he disembarked, he was still shaking his head. He promised to do whatever he was able.

The rest of the day was a blur. That night, unable to sleep, Roz watched videos. Midway through *Life With Father*, she decided to take direct action, then dozed a little. But she rose early and so had to wait impatiently for the polite hour of nine o'clock to call Mrs. Neale by telephone. The woman was distant, but still kind enough to supply Roz with her husband's new number.

Roz was miffed when a machine answered, but she left her number and said it was urgent. Half an hour later, Neale called in return. Their conversation was cordial, strangely decentered, and reserved. Reserved, that is, until Dr. Neale explained himself by talking about having always been a supporter of the Earl of Oxford.

Where is this going, Roz at first thought. Neale rambled on and on until it became clear that his infatuation with Sunshine was not midlife crisis, but a weird meeting of minds – to wit:

"Oh, Sunshine's fabulous. She's come across evidence that Shakespeare – always claimed for English literature, isn't he, because authorities forced him to write in that language! But no – he was, in fact, a German classical author. It's all in *The American Mercury* for July 1940 – but just the tip of the iceberg. But that's why Mr. Shakspur couldn't spell his own name consistently, and no wonder! Sunshine's new evidence clearly explains *Bestdraft Brudermord* – you know... *Hamlet* in the original German, performed by English actors on tour. Still, it cries out for further research. Of course, Sunshine's received a Fullbright. So, there it is – we're off to the continent!"

Immediately after the fruitless conversation with Neale, there was another call. Dr. Tzara was pleased to relay good news for once. He had discussed recent happenings – Thelma, Guelph, Ghibelline, and Neale -- with the dean of the graduate school, who was receptive, understanding, and sympathetic toward Roz's plight. The dean, in these extraordinary circumstances, had given permission for the committee to proceed with its work while having only three members. "Rules always prove exceptions", she said," said Tzara. The paperwork was completed during that same meeting. Signed, sealed, delivered, the problem was solved. All the same, Bix thought it a good idea for the committee to convene on Friday, in the late afternoon (per Dr. Randolph's request), to assess the current situation, to apprise the two remaining readers of the dean's on-going concerns, the upcoming deadlines, and so forth. Beyond that, a meeting would offer a chance to check the committee's progress. Years of experience had impressed upon him the likelihood of colleagues 'putting off everything until the last conceivably possible moment'. In circumstances such as these, 'in the late innings', one could not afford 'to fumble the puck'. (Roz well knew that, never having stepped foot on a diamond, gridiron, or ice rink, the good doctor had trouble disporting with athletic metaphors.) Between now and then, he would take a little rest – well earned, he did not mind saying – and, in the evening, meet with his encounter group.

"One of the little enthusiasms that make Mrs. Tzara less than enthusiastic."

"Tell her I said you're an angel. Thanks, Bix."

"Just giving the unrelenting minute sixty seconds-worth of distance run. It's my job, you know. And it's been my life."

The wistfulness in his voice was not lost on Roz. She knew he longed to retire when this last committee of his long career had finished its labor.

"By the way," he added, "you might want to drop a note to the Dean."

"Done, and I will."

"Good. Talk with you soon."

"Bye."

Relieved, Roz went to the kitchen and glanced at the clock, coming up on eleven. A little early, perhaps, but she fancied a stiff belt. She poured a tumbler full of bourbon, sat on a stool and thought about sagas, *lais*, Dr. Neale, and Sunshine. She could not suppress the thought that the latter had to be a bottle-blonde – the stuff of distended desire and rigidly crossed stars in late September. But time to close mental compartment; there were now more pressing concerns.

With the committee down to a triad, she knew she had to minimize further risk. She knew also what had to be done, when an angry destroyer-god wanted appeasement. Anthropologically, it involved the making of an offering – a piece of smoking meat and a sacred pole.

Friday evening, after the committee's afternoon meeting, Roz resumed the liaison with Randolph. O, why ask why? Ultimately, survival was the highest good, and one did what one had to do. It was not so bad, really. He had taken her to a French restaurant, *tres élégant*, toasted their reunion with anisette and, under a table draped in damask, *de haute en bas*, escorted her elongate fingers to a sensual sample of bursting broadcloth, *a la fouette central*. *C'est dégagé, no c'est dégringolade.*

In return for the sojourn at le restaurant français, she took him for dessert, *faute de mieux*, at the *Bangkok Brazier*, with its outrageous foyer, a small but stimulating simulation of a lingam garden. A theme established, over iced coffee and coconut ice cream, he quoted 'Bawdy-lair'.

The night might have ended in poetry. If only later he had spared her his idiot's wit, when in bed he said: "Oh, what a pair – the brace where munched my one-in-a-thousand lips."

Iteration, reiteration, misiteration.

Chapter 14

It was a month of Fridays, including the following October 9th, when PBS (the Public a.k.a. Petroleum Broadcasting System) had a special guest for *Week on the Street*. Host Morris Resyekur, looking ever more like a greenback-portrait of Washington, introduced his well-heeled panel (and a discerning audience at home) to the able architect of a pending megamerger between Deta-Maglama and Amalgamated Amalgamated, the sartorially correct chairman, president, and CEO of Moorland Associates, Mr. Houghton Moorland. At humorous good length, the avuncular host cheerily queried: "Could we possibly have a crash?"

Knowingly, as if one could make a bear scurry by whispering "shoo," Moorland flicked invisible lint from the crisp crease of his tailored trousers. The camera caught his small, amused smile.

"The fundamentals are so strong," he replied, "the safeguards in the system so sure, the flat answer is no." The comfortable panel of satisfied experts nodded in polite accord from their overstuffed chairs. By the Friday following, the Dow Jones industrial average was at an all-time high, and the panel looked pleased as Punch with their fourth-quarter predictions. And why not, when all standard indicators were *go*, financial newsletters were optimistic, and the Republican presidential candidate Pat Robertson (having recently re-routed a hurricane through prayer) was ready to lead the nation?

But Friday is not Monday, and what a difference a day or two make. The 19th was soon tagged 'Black Monday' as stocks plummeted 508 points in "the greatest crash ever" (or so said the *New York Times*). By Friday, *Business Week* declared: "The great bull market is over." Billions had disappeared; some investors were wiped off the big board, some players swept off the floor – and there was a change in the panel of *Week on the Street*.

It looked bleak, all right. But thankfully, as the holidays approached, people were not jumping from windows as they had done in '29. One who thought of jumping, however, was the recent guest of *Week on the Street*. His merger off, his marriage on the rocks, his sullied name in local tabloids, Mr. Houghton Moorland was having a rough ride. These straitened circumstances (everything being relative; he was not without portfolio or offshore account) made for the demon that drove him on this Friday Walpurgis nacht. It was why he was drunk.

Above all, beyond any public embarrassment, he was humiliated before Catherine, whom, as it turned out, he actually loved. But she was finished with her betrayer, and he knew it was final. She was tolerant, kind, decent, and unforgiving. Her resolve was what made her attractive, when he was in the Harvard Business School and his other dates never knew what they wanted. She had known what she wanted, and it was he. And he had wanted her, at least three ways. Of course, after years of marriage, he welcomed the occasional distraction, as would any man of the world. Far, far more than she, he was the cosmopolite. He knew, for example, that the Moors in Spain had advanced mathematics and kept four wives. Be praised, O Beneficent One. Well, at least he still had his sense of humor. Catherine's lawyers might take his yacht, but they couldn't touch *that*. Now, if only sleep went unmolested.

What conventionality, he thought, to think that life was sometimes like walking through a disturbing dream. Not that he had ever dreamed he was a butterfly – he did not possess that sort of imagination. No – it was something more like time dissolved. Life sometimes seemed like something lived already, like something recalled as fleeting forms in an ancient androgynous's deep winter sleep. Already and always ninety, or nineteen, or nine – just a lingering head on a pillow, with all passion spent except a memory of the memory of desire – a roll of ten thousand negatives in no particular order, faint now, never developed, some perhaps color, most black and white.

What was it all about? He had always made the right moves, or at least the person who felt like him had made them. For example, there was his astute decision to leave UC Berkeley for Harvard, when things were heating up. He thus avoided stigmatization as a free-speech type like Savio, which might have impressed the future in-laws but irritated the corporate headhunters. Then, by listening to folksingers and puffing weed, he had avoided stigmatization as one of the Silent Generation. (By the time Agnew identified a Silent Majority, Moorland was no longer susceptible or concerned.)

In school, he had acquaintances from every imaginable background, so he was familiar with imports and exports on offer in the marketplace of ideas. It was a difficult and polarized time of civil rights, assassinations, and Vietnam. Fortunately, he was out of Harvard in advance of the wacko (why wasn't he at Berkeley?) Timothy Leary. Fortunately, too, a family connection with a member of Congress had spared him the embarrassment of conscientious objection or the need to join future hawkish pundits in doctoral studies on the Continent. About that time, too, he learned there was no such thing as a free lunch – not that one fret over that bit of business now. Besides...

He had seen the megatrends. He knew the future lie along the Pacific Rim and so had worked two meteoric years in Mergers & Acquisitions with an investment firm in Seattle and Tokyo before turning down a vice-presidency to strike out on his own. A few years later, he bought into Apple II, just after Jobs and Wozniak were turned down at Hewlett-Packard and Atari. In all this time, his only losing investment had been a very small stake in a friend's film production company, when the problem was not so much finding a successor to Roger Moore (after Travolta turned down *You Only Live Twice II*) as dealing with the monsoon season in Thailand. Two complete sets had been destroyed, a yacht capsized (which failed to dampen his new enthusiasm for sailing), and the company was under-insured. Never mind; six months later he recouped his loses.

Once, a marriage counselor who, Moorland pointed out to Catherine, was four-times divorced, had asked him to describe himself. When finished, the counselor had pronounced him psychologically fit because he had not responded all at once. Nor had he mentioned blue eyes, sandy hair, and above-average height, but rather an interest in collecting ships in bottles, baseball cards, and pin-up girls from World War Two (scrimshaw, Chinese porcelain, Nazi sidearms, and underground films would come later). That was all to the good. Let others think whatever they like, the bottom line was that he had done whatever was necessary, been a good provider, paid his dues and fair share of taxes, and so there was no need for anyone to ask who he was and what he was doing.

He had been everywhere, stayed in every major hotel in Auckland, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Macao, Manila, Melbourne, Seoul, Singapore, Taipei, and Tokyo. He knew his way around town. Gradually, naturally, he had become jaded. At this point in time, he kept business dinners to a minimum and avoided floor shows altogether. It was simply that the more he knew, the less he wanted to know. He had learned to be careful and to work out other arrangements.

The only exception to this policy had been a recent stag party in Hong Kong, where an old drinking buddy, after years of blowouts and bar girls, was tying the knot with a former beauty queen. It was there that Moorland had met Serena, one of Catherine's maids. He had also come across a real curiosity, and one that might have remained hidden, except for recent events.

This curio was why he was driving to the apartment. He wanted a word with his soon-to-be former sister-in-law. It was she, he had come to understand, who had set these wheels turning. In preparation for this unscheduled assignation, he had been priming the pump all afternoon. By mid-evening, he was sure she might like to join him in a drink, so in the pocket of his great coat he had loaded a bottle of single malt. He also loaded a cartridge.

Of course, she was not at home; so he waited in the car across the street, the radio turned down low, the bottle open. The longer he waited, the more he drank, and the more venomous he became. It looked like snow. The windows fogged, he sat and fumed, removed and fingered the cartridge. He wanted her to see it, before he used it.

When her car finally pulled along the curb, he watched her get out, lock the door, and turn up the front walk. He waited. He wanted her to be comfortably settled when he came to call. For that, he allowed fifteen minutes. Then he made his move.

The apartment's security presented a small obstacle. He had to push half-a-dozen buttons and say "Order of pizza" before someone let him in. Then he made his way up the stairs to her floor and her door, where he rang twice, like a postman.

The door, chained, creaked open to a narrow shaft of light. He could see she had changed into a kimono. Odd. He liked kimonos, but how could she know he was coming?

"Why, Houghton," she said. "What brings you here?"

He considered the question. "Rosalva."

"You've been drinking," she added.

He nodded. "Yes, probably way too much. It's ten o'clock on a Friday night, and I don't know where to go or what to do. But I'd hoped we might talk."

She hesitated, then said "All right. Just for a minute."

"Are you going to make me stand in the hall?"

She exhaled heavily. "It's late."

He shrugged. "You're right. It is." He reached into his heavy coat's deep pocket, to pull out the cartridge.

"What's that?" she said.

"A little something I found in Hong Kong. Subtitles in Mandarin and Russian." He held it up so she could see the cover of the videocassette. "What interests me is the co-star."

It would have needed additional funding to be a low-budget quickie, but *Tornado Suction* did feature the famously formidable Lance Rodmann in an early, seminal role.

"I've always said the Far-Eastern markets are what's happening and where it's at, don't you agree?"

"You're slang is dated," she coolly replied. "Right there with cat's pajamas."

Moorland smiled. "Let's not drag Catherine into this, shall we? Oh, I forgot; you already have, haven't you."

"All right. What do you want?"

"Me?" said Moorland quietly. "I thought we might... talk. But not here in the hall."

"Talk about what?"

He snorted. "Rosalva, Rosalva. Need you really ask? My private investigator... Well, let's not rush into things. Maybe I should just say, *open the door and find out.*"

She eyed him closely.

"Look. I'm very drunk. And, as they used to say, you know judo."

The door closed down to the width of a blade, the chain slid in the slot, metal on metal. Without a word, the door opened wide.

"In that case," he said, "I'll come in." He removed the bottle from his other pocket. "I brought a little reinforcement. Some holiday cheer."

"Mm."

"Glasses?"

She heard the plural. "Is anyone joining you?"

"Yes. Mr. Rodmann's co-star."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "So that's how it is?"

"For now, yes."

"Fine." She went into the kitchen and brought two tumblers. She set them down on the oaken table with the leaf and extra chair she had borrowed last spring. Moorland poured slowly, deliberately, then stopped before the first glass was one-third full.

"Somehow glasses don't feel right." He took a pull off the bottle, then handed it to her. "Your turn."

"I really don't..."

"Drink up."

"I'll drink with you *if* I have a glass."

"A glass. Civilized. All right, we're not animals here." He finished filling the glass and handed it to her.

She affected nonchalance. "I suppose I should say thanks?"

"No need. But suit yourself. Or, better yet, maybe you should wait until you hear what I have to say."

"And what's that."

"A toast, of course." Moorland raised his glass: "What goes around, comes around. Here's to your Dr. Randolph."

She set her glass down. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

Moorland gulped his glass, then poured another. "Depends how you look at it, I suppose. Now if you're me, well yes, it's funny all right."

"Then why not laugh?"

"Cause it ain't that kind of funny."

"Then what is it?"

"Ah well... at a bare minimum, your graduate school is apt to find you and Randolph a little... compromising. Wouldn't you say? Especially if they see a pattern – like say, you with what's his face? Assistant Professor Robert Something, right? My man can lay it out. I mean, that's his job. But hey, maybe the grad school has a film library. One might smooth things over with a modest donation."

"You wouldn't."

"Really?" He drained his glass.

She scrutinized him closely, her mind scanning compartments. His slurred speech was remarkably lucid for one whose eyes were so glazed they had facets. He poured yet another.

"Care for a splash?"

Why not buy time, she thought. "Sure."

He handed her a glassful, and she curled up on a comfortable loveseat. Sun Tzu. She had decided to smoke him by being forthcoming. "Maybe I should explain," she began.

"Oh, do tell."

In carefully modulated tones, she rambled – the trick was not to hurry – until she saw him relax. Then, she told a sympathetic maturation tale, artfully picaresque (and abridged as follows):

It was 1976, the Bicentennial. She had been what, *eighteen*, and finding her way in the world. (She flashed on a red-and-white striped condom with a blue reservoir tip and its spangle of thirteen stars – her first photo shoot – an ad for a men's magazine.) And well, she had fallen in with a bad crowd, needed money, and so made a couple movies – *TS*, of course; and (as a topless walk-on) *Yankee Poodle Dandy* (with everyone in periwigs); and maybe one other. End of story.

"After high school, right?"

"Immediately." She stirred the whiskey with her finger. "I wanted to be an actress. Had stars in my eyes. And besides, I couldn't stay home – it was a battlefield. So I took a greyhound to la-la land, but all the stools at Schwab's were taken. Know what I mean? LA's a tough town. It wasn't like dressing up in Cat's clothes." Nicely turned corner, she told herself.

He studied her face. "What do you mean?"

"Just that. I used to dress up in Catherine's clothes. I wanted to be just like her."

"Why?" He cocked his ear.

This was where she had to be careful; the ear was all, where a less-dulled eye would have already clearly seen the balancing act. But the senses betray one another, brother to brother.

"I don't know. I was what, ten, maybe. She seemed so glamorous – all grown up, away at school. You know, *big sister* – a giant in the earth." (This was queen's gambit, Stein variation.)

Moorland ran a finger around the rim of his glass and said: "Such a big imagination. *Hm.* But I recall... wide eyes. A pretty little girl you were."

How vivid the magic words – the thread in the opposite direction. Now, Roz understood, the idea was to unravel the fabric without breaking the string. Taking it gingerly, she pulled:

"I used to imagine what it was like to be her. To have everything."

"Everything," he repeated.

"Mm." For a moment the modalities collapsed, the figures of her thought conflated into a single image, a compressed irrationality. Welcome, she thought – basically.

At The Sun Tzu Dance Studio, they knew what to do with matched-pair ferrones that for years had been tripping the approach-avoidance tango. Roz crossed her legs carefully, so that the silk kimono parted just above the knee. For all the world of appearances, serendipitously, ever so gradually, the subtle split slid down her thigh. When it caught his eye, such a furtive glance, she knew the worm had turned in the juggler's lobster-trap cotillion.

She said: "It's a little embarrassing, but when I dressed in those clothes, your photograph was always on the dresser. So...sometimes I tried to imagine what that was like – to be with you. You know, as Catherine."

(Had she not been a silly girl?) She shook her head ever so slightly, just enough to let stray strands fall in attractive disarray, then swept them away with a flourish and a small laugh. She knew from shoots that this angle, with her head thrown back, displayed her jawline and throat to best advantage, while it framed her fearful symmetry. A well-practiced gesture, when released it opened the neckline of the kimono, as, at the same time, the split, having reached the terminus, could slide no farther along the smooth thigh. Here Houghton rested his hot hand. As his breathing grew heavier, each exhalation 80-proof of desire, Rosalva was in pure anticipation of probability and outcome – owing to a simple fact. Everything that transpired thereafter was explainable in terms of pigeons and pellets.

In the classic experiment, a pigeon manipulates a response lever to secure the release of pellets. Ms. Stein's expeditious and timely replication of that experiment had as its main object a demonstration of the instability of certain terms.

The Stein model nullified the equation of 'birds' with women (an assumption of Cockney slang) and proposed an alternative chain of significations. A 'pigeon' might be *Columba livia* – but it might also signify a simpleton easily swindled. To that extent, a pigeon was a 'mark.'

Because earlier research had conclusively proved the instability of a 'response lever', it remained only to demonstrate the theoretical link between 'lever' and 'pigeon'. The Stein Model posited a paired identity based upon observation that pigeons have beaks (colloquially, 'peckers').

Finally, a substitution of 'cartridge' for 'pellet' had become incumbent. A conscientious researcher might pass here without further comment, given a firm conviction that the findings of science are free from outside influence. Otherwise, the Stein Model had one serious flaw. It did not clearly show whether release of the 'cartridge' resulted from an action of the pigeon or from interference by peripheral phenomena such as the intentions of a clinician.

Among other considerations, the essay on *vagina dentata* needed firming up, as did the sample of tissue contaminated by alcohol – a not insurmountable difficulty, where the clinician fancied the pigeon. Here, there was a psychological component. Pigeons can be cautious birds.

Under such conditions, there might have been hesitation to proceed, except the technician had determined to run the experiment in the absence of standard controls. This was explainable. More than a technically precise clinician, the practitioner desired to be an artist.

In fact, she was starring in her own show – and, as ever, the show must go on. It was the synthesis of science and art, a masterpiece of staged clinical manipulation.

It was standard practice that, once data were collected, the relevant compages closed, and the clinician gave the exercise not a second's thought more.

But the pigeon started to squawk: "I hope you don't think we're finished." This pigeon, drunk as it was, was motivated by more than pellets. In its bird's-eye view, the technician must come to understand that experimental procedures sometimes entail tit-for-tat, *quid pro quo* – and in the margin, do-unto-others (humiliation for humiliation).

It was a long, long night.

Before the pale dawn, before jocund day stood tippy-toe on the misty mountaintop, after the cock crowed thrice, she was out the door. To make an end, having been had three ways and feeling, oh, a little bedraggled, she deposited a Kodacolor roll of two dozen exposures (truly the operative word) in her locker at the Greyhound terminal. Then she returned to the apartment, to make her most aromatic Arabica and crispy French toast. She even woke him gently. He was no longer a worry, now that they both had something on each other. She endeavored to help him come to this understanding, while discussing family portraits, tabletop tripods, and the timer on her new 35mm camera – together with the effect of certain kinds of evidence upon the outcome of divorce proceedings. Not wanting to lose a stitch of single-needle tailoring, Houghton was an attentive listener.

Alliances, bedfellows, and reciprocity; Rosalva collected the incriminating cartridge and sent him out the door. The chill remainder of that last gusty day of October was spent writing.

Chapter 15

The holiday season approached with good will abounding and the committee functioning smoothly. At least Roz believed it to be. She had actually heard nothing; but, with the round of dinners and parties beginning, no news was good news for now.

In the evening, she wanted to avoid trick-or-treaters. She hated waiting by the door, and she detested the little tykes in costumes running up and down the corridor, so she decided to do early Xmas shopping downtown. She hoped to dispense with her very short list in a single fell swoop. Besides, it was Saturday night.

Elsewhere, Dr. Nick Ropoliz was feeling festive and frisky. He had decided to exercise his decidedly offbeat humor. Though he was less than enthusiastic about KC and the Sunshine Band, the music he selected to kick off the party was "*Shake Your Bootie*." As the guests were hip, this inanity segued seamlessly into Frank Zappa's *Sheik Yerbouti*, then Debussy's "*L'Apres Midi de une Faun*."

Especially for the occasion, he had mounted an oversized reproduction of a photograph taken at a Halloween party thrown by 'Clay Bertrand' forty years earlier in New Orleans. As he was from New Orleans, this evening Ropoliz allowed free play to his French Quarter drawl.

The photograph was well received but, at this Halloween party, maskers milled around a masterpiece in marble, the latest addition to a considerable collection, a reproduction of a Roman copy of an Hellenistic original called the Barberini Faun ("circa 200 BCE, thank you"). Ropoliz took delight in the aficionados admiring his beefcake from all angles, remarking the languid hunk with its monumental homoeroticism, so achingly obvious to the receptive sensibility.

Said Ropoliz thickly: "Mr. Mapplethorpe's got *nawthin'* on this piece. Don't y'all think the faun was carved by some gay genius, on commission from an old fart – a lecherous patrician of Lucullan wealth, who fancied memorializing his favorite houseboy during – how *should* one phrase it – those sublime moments after? 'N' don't y'all agree Arturo might have posed?"

"*Your Arturo?*"

"Why, yes," said Ropoliz. He gestured across the room. "Arturo, come *here* please."

An olive-skinned Adonis with luxuriant black curls responded lazily and strolled toward he who beckoned.

Intending something akin to a nineteenth century tableau, Ropoliz, fussing, requested that his houseboy 'Come on now, strip to your Fruit of the Looms and assume an appropriate pose', so that guests might appreciate his perfect pectorals, taut thighs, and washboard abs. The immediate *ahs* and applause were gratifying not just for Ropoliz, but also for Arturo.

After dancing and a late dinner, some couples went round back to the sauna, some to play billiards in the basement. Meanwhile, others settled into traditional roles, one discussing sports, business, and politics, the other sharing recipes from *Redbook* and *Good Housekeeping*.

Everything mellow, Nick and Arturo excused themselves to go upstairs. About an hour later, there were sirens and a team of paramedics, followed on All Souls' Day by this story in the *Herald*:

"I know I shouldn't have lit the match. I was trying to see our gerbil," Arturo Mata told doctors in the severe burns unit of Flora D. Malle Hospital.

Mata and his employer, Nick Ropoliz, had been admitted for emergency treatment after an 'intra-tubing' session went seriously wrong at a Halloween party.

"I inserted a cardboard tube in his rectum and then Taco, our gerbil," he explained. "But Nick shouted 'Mayday!' That means 'enough', so I tried to remove Taco but couldn't get him out. When I peered into the tube, it was really dark, man. That's why I struck a match."

A hospital spokesperson described the ensuing events.

"The match ignited a pocket of intestinal gas. A flame shot out the tube. Mata's hair was ignited, severely burning his face. Also ignited were the gerbil's whiskers and fur. This in turn ignited a larger pocket of gas farther up the intestine. The rodent was immediately and forcibly propeled outward, like a cannonball. The unusual level of gas in the intestine can be attributed to rich cuisine, in this case lobster *etouffe*."

Masked friends accompanied Mata and Ropoliz to the hospital.

Mata suffered second-degree burns and a broken nose from impact with the gerbil. Ropoliz suffered first and second degree burns to the anus and lower intestinal tract.

Pending investigation by the SPCA, the hospital refused to comment on the condition of the gerbil. (AP)

The story appeared at the bottom of page three, under the headline *Poof Prof Goes Puff*, so word traveled fast. Before long, it became an urban legend elaborated to absurdity, basic repertoire for raconteurs in seedy bars.

More than second-degree burns, the story wounded the politely urbane Dr. Ropoliz, who withdrew to convalesce. He refused a legal-eagle guest's advice to bring suit against the hospital and publisher. He was not litigious and had been taught to turn the other cheek (wags jumped on that remark, too). It was pointless, he said, to harbor ill feeling or seek retribution, and he had no desire to cause trouble for anyone, especially his colleagues and college. Then, he set his affairs in order. To Rosalva Stein, he sent a carefully worded explanation of his inability to continue on the committee and his sincere regrets. He took leave from his department and university.

By Thanksgiving, Ropoliz had removed to Mazatlan. Dr. Tzara was in a state of shock, and Roz was wondering what more could possibly go wrong.

She would find out what more in just over a fortnight, after a police officer at the scene radioed a dispatcher: "Some turkey's done a little carving."

Part Four : Winter

Chapter 16

There was a heavy fog upon the still air when a Latvian poet and professor of literature was found slumped in a corner, her eyes gauged, her body stabbed many times by the knife on the floor.

The inured police pathologist had seen few crimes as gruesome. Though most were superficial, wounds were in excess of a hundred and left the corpse a pincushion sopping a bath of blood. This was duly photographed and the splatters on the wall.

Windows and doors were locked from the inside. The only fingerprints, fibers, and hairs to be found were those of the house's occupants; hence, Dr. Warren Randolph III stood accused of murdering his wife. He, a detective noted, was associate professor, while the victim was full.

She was a handsomely earthy woman, shy of forty, a gardener with weathered skin and soil under her nails. Before the attack, her long, loosely tied hair had framed unaffected chestnut eyes. Pampered and powdered, with her hair up, she was reminiscent of an Alphonse Mucha girl, only older, wiser, with ink on her fingers or cuticles torn from digging in the garden.

Two years earlier, she had taken a sabbatical from which she never returned. During that time, her mother had died, and she resigned university while being published in their native land. The three-volume set, translated into English, French, and Russian, was an immediate popular and critical success swallowed by bereavement. Completely dispirited, she never digested one reviewer who enthused that, were she a man, she would be hailed as Latvia's Thomas Hardy.

Nevertheless, she was hardly Hardy's "woman of the feminist movement – the slight, pale 'bachelor girl' – the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing." No; somehow Randolph's wife passed through the rarefied air of academia without being changed in any way essential. What changed for her were 'seasons'. She did not see them as a stately procession but as an ambiguous metamorphosis. She once wrote there were no more four seasons in a year than six colors in a rainbow; and, that men make war and art, while women make culture. These feelings prompted her to avoid faculty parties – in Randolph's theoretical world she was not at home. She preferred *gros point* and would stay behind stitching while he made the rounds.

Not an adept at cocktail chatter, even simple questions made her uneasy. She knew such questions were framed from polite interest, but she had no pat answers that felt honest. "*Do you like Americans?*" To her, this was like asking whether someone should be liked because they were Latvian. "*What do you write?*" Here, she was unsure what was meant – subject, form, or theme. Imagine, she observed, asking this question of a painter. By contrast, she tended to ask acquaintances about their childhood, what they did in school, or some experience that shaped them. Once, in the spirit of reciprocity, she mentioned that prophetic dreams often brought her sleepless nights.

People found her eccentric. She hung talismans on trees transplanted from the distant hills, and laid flat stones for meandering paths through a suburban yard transformed by steady, patient labor. She had not constructed a Watts Tower or a Palais Ideal, but the Randolph home stood out, conspicuously verdant and over-ripe. It was, at times, something of an embarrassment. The basement, he complained, was jam-crammed with boxed books and the stores of late-aestival canning.

Tomatoes, scallions, lettuce, carrots, chick peas, parsnips and leeks; rosemary, dill weed, safflower, basil, and marjoram for cooking; more arcane herbs were nurtured for their medicinal properties – all were started from shoots and sprigs. Black-eyed Susans and fleabane, tulips and crocuses; strawberries, raspberries, and lily of the valley; dusty millers against the house, but no roses (she preferred less reckless blooms).

The apple trees were annually abundant. Her garden, with marigolds along the marge, was a stopover on the annual migration of monarchs. Where the damp wall turned a corner, there was a small, shell-inlaid grotto overgrown with moss and planted with hart's-tongue fern, dichondra, and clover. A stone bench stood by, under a pruned plum tree, where she sat to read or to watch birds after scattering seed. Or she would sit alone on a stool in the small tool shed – surrounded by spades, hoes, cat's claws, and cotton gloves, their fingers caked in sandy loam – its door, hung with an earthenware sun's tired smile, closed behind her.

When not recalling a dream, not penciling a poem, or when not reliving the past, that was how she passed through what others called autumn, summer, and spring – the view from outside; what neighbors saw. But for her, gardens, dreams, and poems were all one with the constantly present past – even now, later than usual, when the days had grown short, the ground had been turned, and the garden lay awaiting long weeks of cold winds and snow. She had turned it alone, prepared all, her preoccupied husband elsewhere.

It was the Thursday morning of Thanksgiving. A neighbor needing extract of almond, and seeing a car in their open garage, crossed the foggy street to Randolph's. Greta, the neighbor knew, would have it. The woman pressed the doorbell, but no one answered. She walked around to the back door and, after wiping a wide swath with her cuff, peered through the crescent on the window, past the kitchen and into the dining room. Then she gasped, dropped her measuring cup and hurried back across the street to rush through her startled door, push past her amazed family and telephone police whose line was busily busy so over again and again and again until she got through.

In the pathologist's report, Mrs. Randolph would be already several hours dead. Local media were all over this one – so much had lately happened in the SoBart and at university that wire services were picking up the dispatches. However, two less-than-opportunistic local feature writers were completely inactive during this unfolding story. Watanabe was unavailable, while Idos was incommunicado.

The answering machine had a message from *The Herald's* city desk. Randolph had been arrested after a struggle in his office and sent to the county lockup. There, reporters were waiting upon press liaisons and tight-lipped attorneys. Please check in. (She did not, but tuned-in a local shock jock's running commentary.)

The horrendous event caused a singularly dreadful aftershock: she began chain-smoking. Roz spent the entire day at an ashtray and did not answer the telephone. Inexplicably, everything had come crashing down, and she needed time to process. In the early evening, she turned off the radio, shampooed, showered, and stood starkers on a scale; one hundred-seventeen pounds. After blow-drying her hair, she sought solace in the stanzas of *Invictus*.

Eventually, she knew she would be fine. She *had* to get a grip – *that was all* there was to it. Besides, she joked with herself, otherwise it would be anguish, forced to wear a nicotine patch when the damned things leave telltale bumps under the sleeves of favorite sweaters.

Maybe there were one or two things beyond her control; but hey, who makes it happen? You go, girl – come renown or riotous ruin.

True, Roz had a couple anxious days waiting, wondering whether recurrent rendezvous with Randolph would remain unreported; but these passed uneventfully. In her latest assessment, Houghton would be good as gold. He had telephoned the day after Randolph's arrest to say the focus of investigators seemed to be Randolph's personal and professional jealousies. Meanwhile, *In Re Marriage of Moorland* was a slog. In court, Catherine would not so much as look at him. Anyway, if there was anything he could do...

There was not. Over the weekend, she plotted in her burrow and wrote.

She spent the first week of December running between the Dean's office, the computer center, and the graduate school. Everything was on hold. Appointments were scheduled and rescheduled, yet no one that week saw her personally. There was no response to electronic mail or any telephone call in return. Besides smoking, she was eating fast food and sleeping little.

By Friday, her impetuousness irrepressible, she disregarded the Dean's cautious secretary and decided to visit Dr. Tzara at home. Bix might be temporarily overwhelmed – the reason he had failed to respond to her – but he was old infantry, tried and true, and would know how to lead counter-maneuvers. It was time to rally the guard for one final campaign.

After a bottle of Calistoga water (imported from California – she needed to start taking better care of herself), there was nothing like motion to get one moving. Roz thought it was the fastest cure for any malady. With the body moving, heart and mind follow, basically.

She was down the road within seconds of her decision to go. Driving like a demon in the left lane on Daemon, turning south onto Souther, then west at Westvue, she bobbed and weaved to the third roundabout at Booth, shot down Lincoln to the corner of Koerner, revved the engine to round a hard right and land on Tarmac at 4021. What a ride, radio on full-blast.

She parked in the short driveway of Bix's spacious but unostentatious white frame house, with its smith-like spreading chestnut tree, high gables and dormers, its weathervane of cast iron and tole-painted doorharp that read *Velkommen*. In the front window, expiring against the glass, were potted geraniums. She lifted the door's brass knocker and struck the plate, then twice again.

There was a bustle within, then the sound of weather stripping breaking seal as the door was pulled open by a stout, gray-haired woman in a white apron. "Yes?" she said.

"Hi, I'm Roz Stein, and I'm hoping that Dr. Tzara is in?"

"Oh, yes," said the woman. "He's mentioned you. Do come in."

"You must be Mrs. Tzara?"

"No, Mrs. Tzara is out and about. I'm the caretaker. Come in, come in."

"Thanks."

Roz looked around the room. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases lined all but one wall where hung a patient still-life by Chardin, a foggy landscape by Corot, a 15th century cartographer's vision of the Atlantic Ocean (*Beyond this place, there be monsters*). Taped just above the floor, two sheets of butcher paper colored in crayon fluttered, while on the hardwood floor itself was an oriental carpet and brass spittoon. A tall, narrow, glass-enclosed case displayed various items of the tobacconist's trade, an ornate clock inside its glass dome, and an egg-tempera miniature on an ebony easel – and in the dining area she glanced a modestly framed woodcut from the First Folio, the only decoration in the room. Around the table was an assortment of period styles, no two chairs alike, yet the room's atmosphere was all ordered calm and balance.

"Is Dr. Tzara in?"

The caretaker was discreet: "Yes, but he's resting after his morning milk and cookies."

"Excuse me?" Roz was certain she had heard incorrectly.

"He always has milk and cookies after playtime."

The caretaker walked across the room to a captain's chair and side-table with reading lamp. She picked up a thick book, marked with numerous scraps of colored paper, and handed it to her. "This should help," she said.

Roz looked at the title: *Your Inner Child*.

"He's quite preoccupied," continued the caretaker. "World of his own, really. Was going to an encounter group regularly, but wanted to do more – what – 'exploratory' work, he called it, but the others were just scaredy-cats, so he started seeing a therapist. Clara, Mrs. Tzara, thinks it's Alzheimer's. That's where she is now, talking to a specialist. If you want, I could wake him."

"You said he's resting?"

"Yes," she affirmed gravely. "He calls it his 'happy nappy'."

Roz returned to the apartment. Around the time she estimated to be Tzara's dinner hour, she called. His wife answered the telephone but, after a moment's hesitation, handed it to him while in an undertone imploring, "Oh, for heaven's sake, wipe your chin!"

Roz listened to the commotion until Tzara's receiver, fumbled, hit something hard. She held the telephone away from her ear. When she heard his voice, she replaced it.

"Hello. Hello, Roz?" He sounded fine.

"Yes, it's me, Bix."

"I've been meaning to call, but things have just..."

"I know, I know. What's happening, anyway?"

There was a long pause that seemed to signify Dr. Tzara was considering where to begin. At least, this was how Roz interpreted it. Then the pause grew too long.

"Bix?"

"Roz."

"What's happening, can you tell me?"

"It's all happening!" he said brightly.

"Yes, but I was hoping..."

"I'm learning to play trumpet! I never liked the instrument – probably because my father named me after that cornet player, you know. But it's wonderful. I should've started eons ago, but you know what they say – better late than never!"

The trumpet? Roz was flabbergasted but tried to maintain her equipoise. Obviously, Dr. Tzara was not focused. Maybe it *was* the onset of Alzheimer's; but then, in that case, she must simply bring him to a moment of lucidity.

"I need to speak with you," she began, "but not over the phone. Could we meet at your office? I don't know what to do and I need your advice."

"Oh, well, that's very nice. What a nice thing to say! Thank you!"

"Bix?"

"Yes, Roz. Don't worry. I'm right here."

"Could we meet at your office?"

His voice now sounded befuddled: "Oh, I don't know. My office. Mmm."

There was another commotion, and a complaint from Dr. Tzara as the receiver was taken from him; then, another voice: "Miss Stein?"

"Mrs. Tzara?"

"Yes, it's me again. Could I call you back in fifteen or twenty minutes? We have your number."

Apprehensively, Roz waited with a tumbler of scotch in hand. Clara Tzara called back within ten minutes, after setting (not sitting) her husband, with his large bowl of strawberry ice cream smothered in chocolate syrup, before the television. On Friday nights, he liked to watch *Miami Vice*. Her manner was confidential but businesslike:

"Oh, he's been showing signs for weeks now. At first, it was that nonsense about his inner child. I thought, maybe it was a phase or some delayed reaction. You know, regret over having been too old during the Sixties. But it's got so he can't even find his socks in the morning. And lately, I'm afraid the strain of recent events has been simply too much for him, and I'm very concerned. I have been for some time. Of course, I've spoken with the doctors, and they're doing what they can. But it's all rather confusing. They don't know what's wrong, really – it doesn't fit the symptoms for Alzheimer's or anything like that. It might be a neurosis, or just plain silliness. Oh, I don't know. No matter what one thinks, that's not it. I suppose the next step is to talk with that quack of a therapist he's been seeing. You can bet I'll show *him* some inner child!"

At a loss, Roz could only think to say: "He's mentioned transactional analysis. Parent, adult..."

"Yes, yes!" said Mrs. Tzara in exasperation. "Dr. Berne's conventions. I may just write a riposte and call it *I'm Okay, You're So-so*'. But don't you think it would need a good pen name? Something Teutonic, like Christian Friederich."

Roz laughed a genuine laugh. For a second, everything felt all right. Then, Mrs. Tzara continued:

"I know this is bad timing, but I've taken other steps as well. He really can't perform his duties. I hope you'll understand, but I've insisted that Bix retire. I understand arrangements have been made for his replacement. Perhaps, if you made contact with the department?"

Roz said little. She listened without really hearing Mrs. Tzara, as the latter apologized once again for any inconvenience, asked her please to stay in touch, and wished her well during the holidays and the coming new year.

When the line disconnected, Roz was numb. It was incomprehensible. She had planned every conceivable contingency, allowed a generous margin for unforeseen circumstances, and yet here she was with no committee, just like that.

She barely moved a bone before ten o'clock, when she gathered enough of herself to click the remote control. She changed channels mindlessly before settling upon a national network's co-anchored affiliate, whose male talking head, reading the economic news, donned a necktie sporting Santa's sleigh and eight tiny reindeer. Then followed the melodious weather-woman, wrapped in a muff ("Everybody sing, 'fala-lala-lah, la-la, la, lah'").

Christmas was now only days away. It was cold, but there was no snow and retail sales were down. An unseasonal god was disappointing Commerce.

Chapter 17

Like *deus ex machina*, a replacement part arrived from Manshu International University in the person of Dr. Jaime del Rio Diego y Santiago, who, from Roz's perspective, was a sabot tossed into remaining gears. He was a Gray Eminence, or so rumor had it – a 'capable' man not much liked. But the Dean, who had what appeared to be grudging admiration, seemed genuinely relieved to have procured Dr. Santiago's services and told Roz the new arrival was expecting to meet with her that morning.

When she came to the open door of Tzara's old office, now at the disposal of this oblique savant, she found him sorting through boxes, absorbed in thought. She tapped twice, lightly. He looked up from two volumes whose spines he was reading, set them aside and peered at her from behind titanium-framed eyeglasses. He removed these carefully and set them aside, as well.

Louche without lenses, he said: "You must be Ms. Stein." He said this evenly, with the faintest accent.

"Yes. I've just met with the Dean."

He nodded cautiously. "Please. Come in."

As he removed a stack of papers from the stark chair before the desk, she glanced quickly around the room. Nothing of Dr. Tzara remained. The walls were bereft and bare. On the built-in bookshelf behind the desk was a complete set of gilt-bound Great Books, the accretion from centuries of dead white males. The only other volumes were the two Santiago had laid aside, Sontag's essay on disease as metaphor and the annotated letters of Heloise to Abelard.

He motioned for her to sit down. She arranged herself on the nagahide chair.

Unhurried and methodical, seemingly unperturbed by uncomfortable silence, he removed his coat, draped it over the back of the chair, loosened his tie, rolled his sleeves to mid-forearm and sat down, thoughtfully, behind the desk.

"So," he began. "You've spoken with the Dean."

"Yes. Before coming here."

"That's good." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desktop, and joined his hands fingertip to fingertip and thumb to thumb, to form a collar truss. "And what did the Dean say?"

"That you wanted to see me, of course."

"That's accurate."

"And that you are assuming Dr. Tzara's duties."

"I am."

He looked at Roz without speaking, in a manner she took to be passively aggressive. She decided to test him, the great I am.

"I think I've heard of you," she said.

"Oh? Where."

"Dr. Ghibelline, a member of my committee."

"A former member. Yes. I once met Astrid Ghibelline."

Roz suppressed a smirk as she recalled her former professor's condescension toward 'the sage from Manshu U' – and now, the fates having fun, here he was, large as life and twice as real. She had already developed a dislike. Derisively, she asked: "So where are you from?"

"Manshu International University."

"MIU?"

"No, you're not."

Roz said nothing. His response stopped her cold. The interview was not going as she had imagined. She had intended to take his measure during small talk, while ingratiating herself. But here she was, presented with an immediate challenge. First and foremost, she determined to remain calmly composed – and poised. She waited for an opening.

Then said Santiago: "Let's talk about higher levels." He rose and walked around the desk to close the door, then returned to his chair. "Just the two of us."

"Higher levels?" Here we go, she thought; Platonism; more phallogocentric claptrap.

"Or, if you like, we might talk about *children*." The last word was subtly emphasized.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I'm not following you."

"Oh? Then perhaps I should be more specific and say... why not?... 'child actors'."

Suddenly, Roz felt perspiration break out along her neckline. She shifted in her chair.

"Ever the search for higher levels of lewdness," he continued calmly. "Such is the nature of pornography. At the end of a Sade play, they call in the gardener. Or perhaps one should say, L'Gardinier."

Fighting to gain control, she said: "If the etymology fits."

"And versatile you," he yet continued. "As a screenwriter, you must have employed a *nom de plume*? Rosalita Rosalita, maybe? Seeing that Humbert Humbert is taken. Or perhaps something auto-erotic, like Otto Otto...?"

So, she said to herself, he knows about that. "I considered A. Palin Drome," she retorted defiantly, certain it would be aurally lost.

"Yes," Santiago replied. "That must be 'A' for 'asinine'?"

With an imperviously impatient finger, Santiago tapped a photocopy atop his desk. Her attention drawn, Roz immediately recognized the typeface and title: *"Against the Wall."*

He said: "Perhaps you will allow me to suggest a new penname altogether – something bordering upon Aida Cra?"

"I don't like opera." The retort was intentionally flat.

"No; opera's generally too emotive for an operator – with the possible exception of Maria Calloused. No, no; I was thinking about your next series in *So-Bart Arts*. You know, *'Aida Cra On No Arcadia'*?"

It was an ambush. Maria Calloused? Roz now realized, understood sinkingly, that she was not going to best this dude, at least not verbally. Sullenly, she watched him pull a manila folder from a desk drawer.

"You must forgive me, if I sound too much like Major Strasse in *Casablanca* – but, I have a complete dossier on you." He opened the file perfunctorily, then said: "None of this, it seems, appears on your current vita. Let's see – photo shoots with *Hustler*; the films with Mr. Rodmann; a pedophilic parody of *Le Balloon Rouge*; and who can forget the classic *All-Day Sucker*. If one recalls rightly, it appropriates a line from the Three Stooges? I quote: 'If at first y'don't succeed, keep on suckin' 'til y'do succeed'. That's it, isn't it?"

Cornered, she hissed: "So what's your point? What do you want?"

"Want?" Santiago closed the folder. He sat back in his chair, considering her response. When he spoke, it was quietly without animosity – simply matter-of-fact.

"The photography sessions and the movies with Lance Rodmann were made some years ago. Well, people do things when..."

"That's right!" she interrupted. "I was going nowhere and needed money. It helped pay tuition. Think of it as some professor's salary."

"Yes. That and being an escort. Not that it matters to me. I understand all that."

"Oh, do you."

"Yes. I think so. But what I do not understand is the way children were used in remaking the French film."

Roz's mouth was set. She said nothing.

"You see," he said, "questions of legality aside, the problem for me is *when* you made the movie."

With nonchalance, she replied: "So it's recent."

"Yes. Only last year."

"Does that make a difference?"

"It does. You have been on scholarship at this institution for some time. A free ride, *basically*. Isn't that the word employed by your subjects in So-Bart? You are freelancing, are you not? Money seems no longer to be a problem for you, is that not right? I'm gauging by your mode of dress, the car you drive, and the apartment you keep."

Roz knew she might explain herself, make her intentions clearer, but she needed first to determine his sources. "So how do you know so much?"

He again tapped the photocopy atop his desk. "We might start with the friend we have in common. Or should one say, *had*?"

Roz concentrated hard, then asked: "So everyone knows? The graduate school, the..."

"No. This little file belongs to me. You could say, it is for *your* eyes only."

Roz caught a deep breath. Then, she began slowly, deliberately. She sought justification through rational argument, and mentioned that, historically, children have been put to many uses by their elders. As an educated man, he surely knew this. Besides, a poet rightly observed that mores are but the clothes men (and women) wear. This being so, why should anyone be bound by the prejudices of a particular time and place?

Her position, Dr. Santiago said, was the argument of Nabokov's Humbert. "The problem for you is, not everything is relative."

She recoiled in astonishment at this assertion by a Flat Earther. The professor was potty, positively barmy. He would never understand that so-called pornography, like beauty, was in the eye of the beholder; that she was doing research for the unified field theory; and that fieldwork might require an honest researcher to test limits, if data were not to be compromised.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Fear not. I may be Spanish, but I'm not the Inquisition. Say, do you like bonfires... er, bon-bons?" He removed a box of chocolates from under some papers, opened its lid and offered her the tray.

She had caught the Freudian slip and was wondering just what were his intentions. Gads (whatever gods there may be!), to be subjected to the bungled and botched, a man with a head full of nonsense. It was all relationships of power.

Delicately, she selected a bon-bon, little finger extended as in holding a precious teacup.

"Thank you," she said demurely.

"You're welcome."

What mixed metaphors raced through her double-tracked mind, as she cast about for a different line of defense! Would Sun Tzu retreat and re-evaluate? What occurred to her was a ludicrous scenario, an almost cinematic image she tried to cut but could not. In it, she suggested

they recreate a scene from *All-Day Sucker* – while he ridiculously quoted the Stooges. Really, with such imaginings, why pay for cable television?

He seemed to read her mind (that he was referring to any worry on her part was lost to her distraction.), when he said: "You needn't. I'm here to help you graduate."

It was waking from a daydream. "Don't tell me you're doing this out of the goodness of your heart?" She remembered the bon-bon and took a nibble.

He smiled. "I don't do anything out of the goodness of my heart. Rather something else; a little something I want you to do."

Ah, as expected – negotiations, after all. Had he read her thoughts? Finishing the bon-bon, she said: "And what's that?"

Not in a month of Fridays would she have guessed what he wanted. He prefaced his remarks by saying that, although he realized a dissertation had been written, he might require a student to do *some* work for him – if he were to approve that dissertation and sign the signature page. Thus, while he was reading a dissertation, a student could be helping with a private project.

"In exchange, I graduate. Isn't that blackmail, Professor?" She said this engagingly.

"Damn right it is," he replied firmly. "However, one could view your cooperation with the project as sackcloth and ashes – if not a contrite heart."

"You sound like some born-again."

"No. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Yeah, well. Who would admit it – Christendom has so much to answer for."

"Indeed. But that's a matter for another time and place."

Dr. Santiago went on to say that Rosalva Alisebirac was in a unique position to help him unravel some prose poems that had recently come his way. He wanted her to assist him with a definitive edition of *A Book of Common Obsession*, a manuscript found in London. This variant manuscript, along with *Feast of the Epicleti*, would be compared in an annotated edition to a final recension entitled *Hokusai's Great Wave*. The project would explicate the creative processes of L'Gardinier Riche, so the working title of this work-in-progress was *Work in Progress*, to be published by Ark Press.

When he said that, he raised his arms to hold his hands behind his head. Then he smiled broadly: "Well, what do you say?"

"What do I say?"

"An echo. I must be Narcissus."

"What *can* I say. I feel like the nigger of the Narcissus."

"Ah, allusive you. You can see, can't you, that you're the one for this. Now you know why I'm here, no? Sheer opportunism."

Roz thought this remark was her best chance to save face. "Look," she implored. "That's all I've done, is play the cards I was dealt. That's all anyone does."

Santiago sat forward, his clasped hands stretched out before him across the desk. He was searching her eyes, and it made her uncomfortable. Why? There was no incredulity in his steady gaze and no judgment at all – but it made her feel the old saw about windows of the soul.

She looked away. "Exactly how could I help the project?"

"Well, you might help in making notations. Some of Riche's allusions are – how shall I put it – opaque? In my estimation, this is because they are of a personal nature. You, however, may not have so much difficulty in deciphering these, I should think. You see, I am thinking that

they are about you – one of the epiphanies in particular. Who knows? You may even make a contribution to the critical apparatus – an essay or analysis of some sort. It's sometimes instructive to have different points of view."

Santiago's proposal implied not only a risk of exposure, but the loss of control. Her own book would preserve her as master of her fate and captain of her soul – and manage perceptions of her image. She was about to speak when, again, Santiago seemed to read her mind.

"You are thinking," he said, "that someone might say something unfavorable about your contribution? Something critical?"

"I don't want to be misunderstood."

"You mean, you don't want to be interpreted – to have someone reduce your irreducible complexity."

"Analyzed, interpreted, misunderstood, whatever. Classified. Boxed. I don't want to be a figment of some fevered imagination."

Santiago again tapped the photocopy atop his desk and smiled. "That's understandable. It's also insoluble, because criticism and interpretation come with the territory you have staked out for yourself. One supposes that any assessment of your work is turnabout, if not exactly fair play."

"Fair?"

"Yes. We will do our best to keep an eye to the principle."

Roz had heard enough. She decided to screw up her courage and take the existential leap, and if the sage from Manshu U proved truculent or in any way intractable, she would speak to the Dean and take her chances. She said: "So is coercing someone into working on your project an example of fair play? Is that it?"

"No. It violates the principle. You don't have to do it."

"I don't have to do it?"

"Of course not."

"*What is this?* A game? You want to see if I understood *your* principle." She had come to a low heat, but had it under control.

"It's hardly *my* principle, but yes – something like that."

"So, I don't have to do it."

"No."

Roz was having difficulty processing this sudden turn. She could not grasp the mechanics of her relation to this new power, or see how the game would play out. A direct question seemed best: "I thought you said you came here because I was useful to..."

"You are – but that's not why I'm here. I was being facetious. I accepted this assignment without knowing the candidate was you. When Dean Elton gave me your name, I was surprised, to say the least."

Roz shook her head. "All right. I'm lost."

"What do you mean?"

"You seem to be saying... I mean, how did you know that I am me? So to speak."

"Ah, *that*. You know Lee Riche?"

"You know I do."

"Well, so do I. In London, of course; but we first met in Pamplona. It must be ten years ago now – or maybe twelve. At the time, I was editing a book for Charlie Tsitrine. He wanted to

run with the bulls – some Hemingway phase he was going through. Well, he was on the rebound, and I was there to see he didn't kill himself before the book was finished."

"Charles Tsitrine? You mean Charles 'quivering-in-the-intense-inane' Tsitrine?"

"The same. He and Riche were drinking buddies for a time, and that's when I first heard about Guadalajara and the raven-haired Rosalva. The rest has been research, after the chapbook was published."

"*Que dia tan triste...*"

"Yes, of course."

Oh god, she thought.

Roz talked with Dr. Santiago for another hour. He was certifiable. She did not welcome this immediate intimacy, and she was certain that she understood his game. The folder might be used against her at any point. That threat remained, although he had appropriated an appearance of letting her off the hook. So be it, power is power. At the same time, she saw how the situation might work to her advantage. Through the project, she would have access to Riche's texts. She need only "play fair" (whatever that meant or entailed), while doing whatever needed to be done. The decision made, she accepted a few lines from Riche's manuscript that Santiago said he had trouble deciphering. Then she selected another bon-bon.

When she returned home, she made coffee in the kitchen. She looked out the window. The atmosphere was gray and closing in. She turned her attention to the lines entrusted to her, a fragment marked as the *Veda althea siriaca* or Rose Epiphany. As she read, she knew in her bones there was more, and that she must find some way to control it. She read again:

First, a deep darkness. Thereafter rose desire in the beginning, Rose
Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit. Thence, indiscriminated chaos
Come to the Rose-red city, thrice as old as time.

Chapter 18

In the new regimen, Roz reported daily to Santiago's office. This arrangement (syzygy) was less than welcome. It was not merely a matter of being unevenly yoked; Roz was rankled being yoked at all. Paradoxically, the immediate effect was a gradual and prolonged exposure to this strange man's mental landscape, as forbidding as a lunar surface. He was decidedly *other*, but not radical in a way Roz found acceptable. Nor could she explain why the foolishness of Santiago's incomprehensible and insupportable views should be compounded (confounded) by occasional low-luster brilliance. It was unsettling.

The shelf behind his desk told the story. Its holdings were soon expanded to include lexicons for Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and Gaelic. There were dictionaries in French, German, and Russian. Cervantes was in the original Spanish. There were desert rocks, minerals, crystals, and a Sarna bell. Though he never spoke of any of these subjects, there were books on architecture, astronomy, Boolean algebra, Western edible wildplants, filmography, anatomy, the laws of tort and contract, ancient calendars, Hindemith's compositional system, medieval mysticism, Chinese poetry, computer programming, baseball statistics, linguistics, evolutionary theory, Capablanca chess, cryptography, and detective yarns. But there was not a single volume of English literature, semantics, semiotics, or post-structuralist theory; there was nothing of Adorno, Rorty, or Derrida – yet the mattoid spoke of these thinkers and subjects whenever he was not talking about human nature, most irritatingly, as if such a thing existed. Quoting Wordsworth, he laughed about the world being too much with us, then asked: "What would Billy Boy think, now that human beings are cut off from his 'proto-transcendentalist' conception of Nature. Do you think he would seek or require heavy sedation?" The way Roz heard the question, Santiago felt Mr. Wordsworth would end up sedated in either case.

Actually, that was exactly what Dr. Santiago meant, although not even he, theoretically, could have said so absolutely. Such was the crunch of their meeting of minds. With two such people, theoretical problems are always the most pressing.

For Roz, the problem became how to put this strange bird – neither a parrot for the *status quo*, nor a kite carried on theoretical winds – into an appropriate pigeonhole. Santiago seemed to appreciate the structured-ness of */reality/* without feeling it was completely fabrication. Although he admitted classifications were often arbitrary, he would seldom gainsay categories Roz found wrong-headed and oppressive. They managed to agree that data were interpreted, but he did not concur that conclusions were, therefore, everywhere unreliably slanted.

Basically, she found it frustrating to discuss anything with him. Especially desire. Desire was natural. It was Eros; it was life; it was also mimetic – and that was of theoretical importance. His response to her impassioned suasion was approximately *ho-hum*. The interesting question, he countered, was how desire could lead to objectification. In return, Roz's response to his rampant sentimentality was approximately *hum-ho*.

Then there was his bizarre attitude toward sexuality. Although Roz urged it repeatedly, Santiago remained unconvinced that sex was the last bastion of freedom, the last refuge of human autonomy. He said that sex was *a* motor, not *the* motor, in the same breath he allowed that little remained anymore, other than gonads, to jolt people into the recognition they were still breathing.

Then there was Sex and Gender. As a feminist, Roz was surprised to learn that Santiago agreed sex and gender were distinguishable. Not that she saw the good doctor as a caveman but, after all, only a Neanderthal would say that biology controlled destiny. Still she would have been pleased that he was capable of any insight at all in this regard, except he extended this line to say that humans were born with sex but chose gender – whether through acculturation or preference. This lunacy conflated orientation and gender, and muddled a hard scientific fact that biology determined orientation.

Because the doctor was trying to have it both ways, she began to hear the grating noise of cognitive dissonance; or perhaps the bobbing of floating signifiers, as orientation bumped against non-destiny. The conflict resolved when she recalled to herself that everything was (a) subject (to/for) interpretation. All theoretical difficulties could be explained through higher levels of analysis; but for want of time, she closed mental compartments. Besides, the real danger was

that one might become as certifiable as the new chair of committee, who was seeing only what he wanted to see.

Roz might easily have summarized their differences. For her, the sexual mores of any period were signs for how society was structured. Categories were arbitrary conventions, names that had force because humans lent them force. Therefore, the social regime is challenged when the sexual regime is challenged. But the reductive Dr. Santiago asserted categories exist because humans recognize real distinctions in the world; while radical politics, too austere dogmatic by nature, tend to reduce shades of gray to readily comprehensible black and white.

Whatever.

She eventually placed him under the taxon, neo-antidisestablishmentfoundationalism. (He knew she thought this.) And he had begun to see her as a fundamentalist of the postmodern persuasion. (She, however, only suspected this; she could not know it.)

Before long, Roz could no longer imagine staid Dr. Santiago in any physical relationship. How could she have *imagined* the weird scenario of their first encounter? He was cerebral to the point of sexlessness. There was no camaraderie as with Tzara, and there was no confusion of role – no question of being colleagues. He was ever in the role of teacher and she of student – but he listened to her opinions in a way that her more egalitarian professors had not, and he did not seek the last word. At times, this was charming. As expected, he held doors open in a vaguely courtly way, but she began to notice unlikely inversions for someone of such a patriarchal demeanor as he. For example, the gray eminence fetched her coffee and quite often washed the spoon, cup, and saucer after her. And he told no jokes of suggestive innuendo, but rather witty stories. Even though it was consistent with his general sexlessness, this too, was unsettling from the standpoint that he never exhibited the usual susceptibility to her charms. It was tantamount to disarmament of tactical weapons.

Naturally, in these comfortable circumstances, work on the project progressed smoothly. That, too, was bewildering. Steadily, he released to her more of the recently discovered London manuscript. It was of longer length than the later versions ("Think of it as Lee's *Book of Ruth*," said Santiago). Also, a journal had been found; but he said, without elaboration, that it entailed specialized problems. This piqued Roz's curiosity. It was cause also for new anxiety. First, she was surprised to learn that Riche had written about the former Yankees slugger (as a ghostwriter, surely). Second, she could not appear too interested in what she desperately desired to see and, perhaps, control.

"Do you think of London as a backwater?" Santiago asked out of the blue.

"Of course not," Roz replied in amusement.

"Paris?"

"That's absurd."

"Tsar Peter's St. Petersburg?"

"I don't know. The Czar himself thought so."

"Then how about Cleveland? It has a fine museum and symphony orchestra."

"Getting warmer, I'd say."

"All right. Port Arthur, Texas."

"Definitely a backwater."

"Yes, perhaps so. Yet it's the home of Robert Rauschenberg and Janis Joplin – and perhaps of other important artists we have yet to discover."

She nodded, but not in agreement, and in a carefully modulated tone said: "Your point being?"

"Ah, that." Santiago handed her a single sheet typed with a phrase from *The Saturday Review*, an artifact from 7 January 1899. "You want to go to New York, do you not?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why?"

Roz glanced at the quotation and shrugged: "Surely you've read this."

"Yes, of course."

Her agitation was mounting. "Well?" *Get to the fucking point*, she wanted to add.

"Ah. Then you agree with the writer about 'the limited life of the country folk who live in a backwater out of the main stream of the world'?"

"Don't you?"

Santiago scratched his chin. "I don't know. I might question the implication that life at the center of fashion is somehow less limited because it is at the center of fashion. Do you know what I mean?"

"Maybe. But at the same time, your reservation sounds like a rationalization. You know what they say about New York. If you can make it there..."

"Yeah, yeah. Maybe you're right. I was born in Guayaquil."

"Where?"

"Ecuador. I haven't been home for many, many years. But say – you must think SoBart is a backwater, no?"

"It's farther back than that!" At last she was steering her own ship again.

"I see. But anyway, I would like you to write an essay about Riche's background and *milieu*, to use the old term."

"Away from the centers of fashion?"

Santiago smiled slyly. "Exactly. So what do you say?"

"Mm, I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Why not? You can use a penname, if you like. Seriously."

"All right," Roz shrugged noncommittally. "Let me think on it." *What a lark.*

It was a quandary. Was coercion present? Coercion a la *copure pure*? That is, present legalistically, not theoretically – present in a sense fully actionable – present in violation of the spirit of the letter of the law. There was little she could do about the committee or the progress of the dissertation – she knew that. More, it was distasteful in the extreme to be subject to – no, to rely upon – no, to work with the Sage from Manshu U, a disconcerting circumstance that sucked vital energy and siphoned all thought. It was like, you know, woe the ship and owe the captain.

She curtailed attendance at gallery openings (in any mode of dress) and wrote nothing for *So-Bart Arts*. She nonetheless remained resolute and resilient, and she retained her long-range strategy. As Roz saw it, Santiago had begun to facilitate her interests inadvertently, when he forwarded fragments of Riche's writing. In other circumstances, she would have been a duck in mud. Analysis and interpretation always kept her mind off other unpleasantness – but the nature of Santiago's project did not, and could not, spare her unwanted self-reflection. It was stressful, not distressful. It bred a fine-tuned anxiety, the London manuscript. Among other passages, she was anxious about this little number:

in the rosarium of *1 Epiphanies* 2:3

rose chamber rosewater rose lake
O love is like a red, red rose (or rose chafer)
rose fever
O rose thou art sick as a rose by other name
O Rosalva my Rosaline
my rose of the world
thou rose among violets and last rose of summer
la vie en Rose Selavy, c'est la vie

This was only for starters. Even more particularly troubling, Santiago seemed to believe this passage could be correlated with the dream journal. Shrugging nonchalantly, he handed Roz a typescript. At the top of the page, she read:

A linguist named Mary Posa
or possibly Polly Glottaal-Schtop

"The first two lines are on a scrap of paper found in the journal," Dr. Santiago explained. "The ink is a different color from the rest. And I should also say that the typed sheet follows very closely the journal's layout and so forth, if that's the correct term."

Santiago proceeded methodically, as though testing the temper of a plenary session, as though mindful of Watchers in the Park. Slowly and carefully, he began to lift the veil from the apocrypha. The more exposition provided by the Sage from Manshu U, the more anxiety gave way to fascination. Roz felt a heady, almost sexual, sensation of entering the labyrinth.

This was the moment of her firm decision to write an essay on Riche's *milieu*, to borrow the sage's tired terminology. Fate, or maybe a *deva*, was handing her the keys to this kingdom, the means to lock as many doors as she pleased.

In the dream journal was a description of a female phantasm, *donna dei miei sogni*, that correlated possibly with a marginal note in pencil – *Lycaeides sublivens* Nabokov. Santiago said he had translated this passage the previous evening.

Ms. Stein was more surprised and curious than embarrassed that the names on the scrap appeared also in the credits of two films with Lance Rodmann. She was, however, grateful that the professor apparently felt no need to reiterate his earlier assertion that Rosalva Alisebirac was in a unique position to be of real assistance with the annotated edition.

Mustering poise, she asked: "Is it an old or recent entry?"

Dr. Santiago replied evenly: "Difficult to say. The dream journal contains whatever Riche jotted down upon waking in the middle of the night, so he probably wrote on the first blank page that presented itself. But, presumably, the scrap was written *after* the pages between which it was inserted? And Lee is, presumably, the one who inserted it there, and for some reason. Ah, me. If only we could send writing samples to a graphologist, for the sake of establishing an approximate chronology."

If only, Roz repeated to herself. Gratefully, the analysis of handwriting would not be a methodological tool. In her estimation, this was yet another of the good doctor's recipes for

fruitcake, as he continued to say that Riche's cursive script had changed over time and suggested that its increasing fragmentation might be suggestive.

"The angle of a nib, the weight of a stroke, the pressure upon a page, the form of a letter, the space between that and other letters, the spaces between words, their size and slant..."

Roz stopped listening. She *knew* that she knew where Santiago was leading and wanted none of it. Her handwriting, too, was becoming disjointed with the passage of time, while her mental faculties remained finely attuned, thank you. It was irritating. Herr Doktor the polymath clearly prided himself on being something of a cryptographer.

"...might help to establish that timeline, if only the scrap were not written in block letters. Graphology is useless when it comes to block letters. Of no more help than it is in analyzing character."

Oh. No help in analyzing character. Never mind. Roz returned her thoughts to the Mystery of the Scrap. Earnestly disinterested, she was hoping it would/could prove to be a red herring. That would make it well fish.¹ It was the door to the labyrinth: a page in the journal had an Italian phrase written in cipher and a pencilled note in the marge – and right there, inserted, was the scrap.

What was Santiago saying? It seemed a bit of a stretch. The description of "Mary Posa" was not at all like Rosalva Alisebirac – and, taking into account *sublivens* Nabokov, nor was it anything like the nymphet Dolores Haze. Yet still, perhaps, it had some larger significance and Santiago might be correct; that is, why write and insert it unless it was intended that someone should follow the way pointed?

The Spanish word for butterfly, *mariposa*, actually *was* floating in the description on the page opposite the Italian phrase – and this was why Santiago felt the scrap was intended to make the metaphor concrete. Well...

Such are chains of signification. True, both *mariposa* and Mary Posa appeared in the manuscripts Roz compared, but the words were not in proximity at all. They were juxtaposed in the journal only, and apparently as an afterthought. Had Riche learned something, at the end?

Santiago was not the only one to find this scrap interesting. So did an old associate of Riche's at Ark Press, a man with whom the professor occasionally disagreed but who was, in fact, editor-in-chief of the project. Santiago, as it happened, had been brought into the project because of the nature of the dream journal. He did not entrust this volume with Roz. What little she saw of it was typed transcription only. She was allowed to handle drafts and fair copies of *E*, *CO*, and *H* (or 'ecoh', as the three books came to be called), while memoranda from the editor-in-chief began referring to the "E-writer" and "H-writer" as though differences in style had made different people of Riche.

Ah, to be a keeper of the key. What a marvelous thing it was, to be in control of sources enough to shape perceptions. Unlike the devout Henry VIII, with his version of Deuteronomy, Riche would most likely not give rise to a Tyndale.² Besides, Tyndale was not a pragmatist, he was a true believe foolish enough to roast for the accuracy of a rendering, all along asserting divine inspiration for some long lost */original/* text. As one would hardly claim that angels dictated Riche's writings, who then would know or care whether, here and/or there, a word were misspelled or misplaced, or a phrase entirely mislaid?

¹ See *Hokusai's Great Wave, Annotated*, page 13, note 45 et sec. [GAJ]

² See: Gardner Rich, *Our Present Postmodern Condition*, page 248. [QED]

When she was not in Santiago's office, she began to see him sometimes downtown, but more often in the SoBart, especially at *Javier's*. The professor had recently come to know the baker, and the two would sit outside, arguing over *kabushino* in the raking light, when the café first opened its doors in the early morning. Santiago enjoyed hearing the baker's views, whether on *The Lay of the Cid* or on language acquisition. Of all things, Javier was waiting for Basque to become the lingua franca. Nearly everyone was learning English as a foreign language, he said; but the moment of its triumph was also the moment of its defeat. One day soon, English would go the way of other universal languages: Koine Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and Gaelic. English was already breaking into dialects, and these would become new languages, just as Latin had become Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, and Romanian.

"Yes," Javier enthusiastically affirmed his own statement. "Es verdad, no?"

"Why do you think Basque will succeed?" a straight-faced Santiago asked in all apparent sincerity.

Javier's brow furrowed, as if he could not understand anyone gainsaying this point. "It is natural process. Or search for the root language primera of Europa – a backwater to centuries of the persecution. No, no – back-leash. Eh? Viva la revolucion!"

Then he winked at the professor, who said:

"Mucha leyenda le rodea, pero, su figura ha sido estudiada con gran rigor por grandes especialistas..." and so on.

When they did not talk, they played Capablanca chess and got along famously. For her part, whenever she encountered the professor there, Roz would chat briefly with Nute and order coffee to go. She found Nute interesting, if a little too uncritically subjective in her favorable assessment of Dr. Santiago. Once, as a counterweight, Roz described their theoretical impasse. Nute listened patiently, then just shook her head and asked if anything had changed since the disputations between nominalists and realists. Was there not some middle ground, a middle way? Well, Roz had thought, someone with a Masters in linguistics ought to understand these things better. On the other hand, why anyone as smart as Nute chose to work in a bakery was beyond comprehension.

On this particular morning, Nute started to discuss the well-known painter who once lived upstairs, but with coffee to go, Roz was ready to go. It was not the time or place for this subject, to which she had given not a thought these many weeks. She thanked Nute and made for the exit.

It was uncomfortable, passing them at their little table as she departed. Why Santiago and Javier sat outside (with the door open!), bundled against the clear morning cold of mid-January, she could not fathom – but it was convenient in providing an excuse for her not to tarry.

As she hurriedly passed, Dr. Santiago cordially asked: "Making any headway with Riche's milieu?"

She smiled warmly. "I'm working on it."

Chapter 19

What a strain on the denizens of SoBart the past several weeks had been. The Randolph affair was only the latest story in a descending spiral that began with widespread publicity of a mishap during construction of a federal building. Then came national coverage of a local mail-fraud operation, followed by the bludgeoning of a comely graduate student. When the national media departed, local papers in their society pages continued to carry scandal, including gossip about the messy Moorland divorce. Relief came solely in *Arts & Entertainment*, where notice was taken of the changing fortunes of a once-obscure SoBart painter. The work of Thomas Nygaard was suddenly collectible, and there was speculation this came of the notoriety surrounding his mural at the Moorland estate.

Dr. Santiago kept an eye on the investigation into the macabre murder of Greta Randolph, as evidenced by news clippings atop his desk. Roz, now that this brief episode for her was over, barely glanced at these. Being linked to this nexus in any way was too unpleasantly surreal, so her purposeful inattention included not the slightest impulse for contact with her professor in his incarceration.

Santiago, however, went to the county's detention center, to speak with Randolph from the other side of a glass barrier. But the prisoner, still in denial (according to psychologists), was shocked at the realization of his potential for violence and could not concentrate.

A conversation with Randolph's lawyer proved more fruitful. The crime was so obviously not one of passion that no defense could be mounted except temporary insanity to convince a jury about the first ten or twelve stab-wounds. The problem remaining was how to interpret the other ninety, when those shallow wounds indicated the possibility of torture. Nevertheless, there was a difficulty for the prosecution, as well, and that was the prisoner's motivation, inextricably linked to his mental state. There was no apparent animosity or antagonism, except (again, according to psychologists) the postulate of possible professional jealousy.

The evidence against Randolph was circumstantial. Although it could not be shown he was home at the time of the murder, he was without alibi. It did not help that Randolph refused, during interrogation, to divulge his whereabouts. And yes, of course, said his lawyer, the defense would be relying on an expert to provide testimony.

The trial began the first week of February. With charcoal overcoats at mid-calf and heads barricaded against the cold, attorneys, witnesses, and reporters scurrying along the iced-over walk to the courthouse looked like ciphers in photographs of the defenders of Stalingrad – anonymous and determined among the rubble. Perhaps some looked desperate, especially the line of students carrying placards in support of their teacher. But they shouted no slogans and remained still as the crisp, grim air. Then came the scarcely hoped-for airlift.

After three days, Randolph was cleared. Owing to the patterns of blood splattered across the floor and upon the wall behind his wife, the defense's expert witness convinced a jury of peers that the murder was not a murder at all. It was suicide. The deepest wounds were last, the initial wounds clearly hesitant and superficial. Gradually, the stabbing gained force. Awkward thrusts gouged the poet's eyes, and an unimaginably determined last slice severed her throat. Shapes and angles of wounds, splatters of blood, the way the knife had landed, all were consistent with this sad reconstruction. Upon being recalled, the police pathologist allowed that this interpretation adequately explained the facts.

The jury deliberated less than an hour. Reporters learned later that the verdict had been unanimous on the first polling. When Randolph was released, he received the manila envelope containing his belt, watch and wallet, and he accepted a ride from Dr. Santiago.

He could not yet return home, he said, and he needed to talk, so they drove across town to a Ramada Inn off the interstate. Every other booth in the restaurant was vacant, including one in the corner where they sat down, Randolph with his back to the door and the main floor.

They ordered coffee.

At first, Randolph remarked the weather, and that he could not believe he was free – that even yellow-gray pollution was cheering on this particular afternoon. After coffee came, and he had settled somewhat, he fiddled with the menu and began to speak with a subdued earnestness.

He was grateful for Santiago's assistance, and the university forever more had his loyalty for holding his position. Perhaps lectures could be resumed the following week, and all his other duties, but he had no wish whatsoever to continue working with the committee. The reason for this disinclination would become clearer, he said, by and by.

There was a silent space. Randolph wanted this last statement to sink in, as much for his own benefit as Santiago's. It was a first decisive step, and he gauged Santiago's reaction. There was none. The inscrutable gray eminence registered neither surprise nor consternation.

Santiago knew of Randolph's liaison with Rosalva, and other material facts as well, but it seemed best to let Randolph tell his story at his own pace. Patiently stirring his coffee a second time, he waited for Randolph to continue.

As though absentmindedly searching an indexed card file, Randolph walked his fingers across an assortment of raw sugar, refined sugar, and artificial sugar – neat paper packets in a ceramic caddy. Finished, he slid the caddy over to precisely spaced shakers of salt and pepper, and a dispenser for napkins with a plastic pouch for toothpicks – all the mundane amenities not available on the small table in his cell. His thoughts collected, he broke the silence to inquire after Nick Ropoliz.

"We're in contact," replied Santiago. "As I'm sure you know, he's now in Mazatlan."

Randolph nodded. "You know, Nick used to say that every word ever spoken is floating somewhere. Well, I hope he's wrong. I hate to think of all my bad jokes. It's very strange that, lately, I seem to recall every stupid thing I've ever said or done. I guess that's what waiting in a small room can do for you."

Santiago nodded.

Randolph smiled wanly at this self-revelation, then continued slowly.

He had never felt so overwhelmingly alone as in the stark cell – there had been so much time for remorse, so much time to think. Bringing nothing in, taking nothing out, the concrete cubicle was life itself – its naked bulb a flicker in the face of infinite darkness, fore and aft. What had he done? He had traded his cheek on a too familiar shoulder in the watches of a winter night for the overheated couplings of June and July; the sticky pretense of passion, a simulacrum of sentiment, the feeling at the showroom when trading up for a newer, sleeker model. He felt like the first lines of Shakespeare's one hundred-tenth sonnet, his wife's most-loving breast was gone, and it was his fault. Really, he had not seen her. Greta had been too complexly simple, a single tree on a vast horizon or a sprout breaking soil in a clay pot – however small, something utterly real. And he had lost it by opting for artifice. He was, in the end, an excruciatingly silly man – didn't Santiago agree?

Santiago still said nothing. He was listening all the harder, as Randolph's feelings for his wife became clouded and the confession more tangled:

Greta had been great, in the beginning. Then, she had been full of ideas and energy and was so different from himself in her many accomplishments. But after years of marriage, their personal interests, never exactly coinciding anyway, became ever more widely separated. And after the death of her mother, she withdrew entirely. She slept in a different room. Estranged was the word; they had become estranged. He was really at the breaking point when Roz Stein (he enunciated the name carefully) began to pay attention, to see him in a different light.

"Just imagine that," he said. "For starters, all my life, other guys got the babes. I couldn't believe it, when this gorgeous creature asked me to be a reader on her committee. I mean, it was enough just to see her in the classroom twice a week. Then one thing led to another. It all seems *innocent*, almost. Certainly understandable anyway, if not excusable. You see, it didn't happen overnight. It wasn't some cheap... well, not for me, anyway."

What more could he explain to make Santiago understand about Ms. Roz Stein – that he had entered a world of melodic hooks without songs? That's how he felt, but he could not say it. So he said what was obviously the reason why he had allowed himself to get wrapped around her finger.

He had never before known such perfection of outward form as to render meaningless any interior flaw. It was enough to cause belief in a karmic law, that somehow that appearance must correspond with, or result from, virtue or accumulated merit. She was extravagantly beautiful, a shamelessly naked statue alive and breathing – and he, it was so painfully clear, had gone from foxhound to weenie dog in the space of a few weeks.

At this, Santiago laughed. "We are all weak-side pawns at one time or other."

"So, you understand? You understand why I *do not* want to be on the committee? I can't possibly. Do you understand? I *can't* see her again."

"I understand. But the truth is, *I* need you, so it's my turn to ask whether *you* understand. The department needs to make an end – to put this business behind us. We can arrange for the committee to complete its duty without any further necessity to meet with Ms. Stein. So what do you say?"

Randolph pondered the possibility. "You're sure?"

"Have you read the final draft?"

"Yes. Twice."

"What do you think?"

"Hm. Well, it's still a little uneven in places – but you could say she's brilliant."

"Yes." Santiago was completely matter-of-fact. "Appalling, no?"

The two men sat in silence a moment, staring out the window framing the parking lot, the overpass, and the haze beyond. Said Randolph: "I've got to trust someone. I don't know you, Dr. Santiago – not at all, really. But there's something else – something I need to tell someone. Can I trust you?"

Santiago looked at Randolph levelly. "You must decide that for yourself."

"Yes. I know that. And I think I can." Randolph exhaled heavily. "Dr. Santiago, I saw Greta. Early, the morning she was... you know. I mean, I came home and saw her there. And I did *nothing*. I know, I should have done *something*. Called police... something. But I panicked. I was scared of being discovered. My god. I wasn't thinking about *her*. I wasn't even... I was

fixed upon the whole mess with Roz, worried where it might point and what would happen. So I got out of there. I just ran. But it happened, anyway. I got accused."

"What were you thinking, when you saw the body?" Santiago asked directly. "That it was a robbery, or..."

"I don't know. I don't know what I was thinking. Except what I just told you."

"That's all? No suspicions? No intuitions?"

"I *don't know*. I mean, it didn't even look *real*, it was so... *god!* I just ran."

Santiago fell quiet. He looked at his cup, then at Randolph: "Did you love her?"

"*Love* her!?" Randolph looked away.

Santiago lived off-campus in a house furnished by the university. He told Randolph the couch was available, should he need a place for the night, and the latter accepted gratefully.

The house had few sticks of furniture, but it was clean. A small table with single chair in the kitchen, a mattress on the floor in one of two bedrooms, and the aforesaid couch (luxurious in these Spartan surroundings) along with an oaken rocker in the front room.

"You have no books on the shelf," Randolph observed.

"Ah, that. I brought precious little with me from MIU," replied Santiago. "Why schlep books around the globe? So it follows, I wish I had brought one or two. But had one brought them, one would not use them. It always goes like that, no? All the same, I had to put something on the walls of the office, so I picked up a few quaint and curious volumes from a second-hand dealer downtown. From an estate sale, I think, so they are mostly for show. They were in a box, and I bought the box. I don't know – maybe you think I should buy some for here, too?"

The next morning, Randolph was surprised that he had slept soundly. He put on the previous day's shirt and trousers. Then he asked to be driven home, so he might fetch a change of clothes. He was in and out of the house in less than five minutes.

The following week, Randolph was back in the classroom thanking his students for their unflagging support in this time of trouble. Within a couple days, he removed from Santiago's house into temporary quarters at the Hotel Mistral. An agent was handling the sale of his home. Although it was true he would miss the blossoms in his wife's garden, a fresh start seemed best. The one time he returned to the house to collect a few things, he thought he saw a ghost. There was no need for that now. He was just starting to discern something of the old rhythm in his work. He had enough else to bother him.

Meanwhile, owing to the legwork and savvy of the sage from Manshu U, Dean Elton had granted the committee special consideration in extraordinary circumstances. This unprecedented wide latitude included Dr. Nick Ropoliz, who was, after several telegrams from Santiago, entirely amenable toward retaking his seat on the committee.

Dr. Santiago had persuaded a number of dignitaries of the efficacy of permitting Ropoliz to use overnight delivery services to do his part from Mazatlan. He insisted that distance learning was the next wave in education. There was no reason for City University to lag behind the times. The Dean, the President, and the Board of Governors agreed. The matter climbed up the ladder, then waltzed back down. The Board decided it was up to the President, who decided it was up to the Dean, who decided that, in the end, Santiago knew best.

So there it was. Randolph was finding his feet while Ropoliz stayed secluded in Mexico – but Santiago had found a way. The committee again stood at three.

Fine, thought Roz Stein, the Three Musketeers – Pathos, Bathos, and Nachos.

Part Five : Early Spring

Chapter 20

The weather in SoBart was unsettled. Sometimes, there was sleet on one side of the street, dry walks on the other. Or, it would snow when the sun was shining. In the morning, if it was overcast from the previous night's storm, a blinding sun would cut through the clouds to bring warm winds from the southwest. By evening, skies would be clear, snow would be melted, overcoats would be removed, and winos in shirtsleeves would walk to the corner liquor store.

By the ides of March, snow flurries melted immediately because the sun had more or less decided to stay out all day. In this relatively warmer weather, sparrows began to view puddles on sidewalks as public baths. Rosalva Caribe y Sila (the change in surname had been granted by the same court that acquitted Randolph) was feeling just as clean and fresh. She had a doctorate in hand and a new start in the English department of a private liberal arts college with a pronounced interdisciplinary bent. While she had accepted (grabbed) the first offer that came her way, it was a fortuitous fit with competitive salary and generous benefits packaged to match. The offers that followed were also attractive, yet not so good. The best had come first and, *voila*, she was back on track, on schedule for an illustrious career.

The hiring process required Roz to write an essay upon the upheaval in late-Victorian gender roles. (Submitted separately, one paragraph was in longhand.) She felt the development and popularization of cultural relativism was linked to the equivocal position of children during that period. She had pride of craft in knowing that her personal indignation against widespread abusive practices had not clouded her judgment, and that she had remained objective.

The essay discussed hearings before the Royal Commission, whose members made liberal use of Mrs. Jeffries's infamous flagellation houses – as did members of the Liberal Party – when not expending twenty-five guineas for the pleasure of raping virgins no more than twelve years of age. The privilege of raping still younger children could cost as dearly as one hundred, so this pleasure was generally reserved for club-men from the West End – sportsmen whose watchword was fair play. At four, children were deemed ready for fellatio; and at five, developed enough for penetration. At the going rate, it became a sound commercial practice to raise unwanted babies (seldom in short supply). There were modern amenities, as well; one

fashionable establishment in Half Moon Street served up the *specialite d'maison* (flagellation and rape of the very young) in rooms with walls proof against screams and whimperings.

It was the first essay of this kind that Roz submitted under her new name. She purchased a special linen paper (20-percent rag content) on which to print it.

On a late Friday afternoon, Roz's last in Santiago's office, he wished her well and poured two small glasses of ouzo.

"We should make a toast," he insisted cordially. "Something other than *salud, amor, y dinero* – even though I wish you these things."

"Sure, why not." She was expecting, by right, to be offered some congratulation for her accomplishment.

"What shall we toast?" he said quietly. "Why not the principle of reciprocity."

What an ass he could be. "The principle of reciprocity?"

"Yes, fairness. The golden rule, you could say."

Roz kept her composure, but her sense of *jeu* rose to the surface. "Oh, no! – not that old *do unto others as you want others to do unto you* jazz? Well, it's time to ask. Suppose someone wants you to shoot them in the head?"

"Mm."

"Well, professor? Then what." That got him, she told herself.

"The rule is procedural, not prescriptive..."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"...and there are some things we should not want. Notice this implies that we want them, at least sometimes."

Yeah-well, she almost said. "And what are those things that we should not want?"

"Things with bad consequences, however subtle."

Nervous fiber was tingling and gray matter was screaming "Lame! Here we go again!" – but she managed not to twitch. "And who's to say what's bad?"

"Don't you honestly know? Do you think a thief likes to be robbed? Rationality helps. Experience helps. History."

"Biased. Winners write history."

"They do. But if *anyone here* should know, it's *you* – there's always something in the margin, if one is willing to do the homework."

What the hell was he talking about? Roz managed not to wince through this exchange by exercising considerable control of facial muscles. Careful not to sound condescending, she said: "If I may be allowed a small criticism, it sounds too simplistic."

Simple-minded, she wanted to say, but refrained.

"Mm. Yes, perhaps at first. But I thought you would appreciate a principle that implies autonomy – although admittedly, its operation suggests limitations. That may be unfashionable."

Roz smiled her brightest smile. "You know, we're still holding our glasses, Professor. So, how about a simple 'cheers' instead?" She wanted to leave on a grace note, a high note now beyond reach.

"Cheers, then. And congratulations, Doctor."

Taking a sip, Roz said: "Oh, I like the sound of that! But I must confess. Ouzo reminds me of turpentine, if you want to know the truth." Her charming laugh was a chime.

"Well, that's no good – and I apologize. Next time, champagne. I promise. Like so many things, ouzo is an acquired taste."

"Really, it's fine. I'm starting to like it. And I'll certainly always remember it." She took another sip. "That's what's important. Moments like these."

Santiago smiled too, only wryly. "Well, here we are, at the end of a long road. We can discuss anything you like, anything at all except the project. I beg you."

"All right." Dr. Caribe y Sila was feeling fine, back to form and scrappy. "I remember you once said that the interesting thing was how desire could lead to objectivity."

"Objectification. Treating others as objects to further our ends."

"All right. But what if two people *agree* to treat each other as objects?"

"Agree?"

"Yes. Say someone meets someone attractive at a disco. It's closing time, they're lonely, they both know it's a one-night stand."

"So?"

"So they go home together. Where's the objectification? I don't see any abuse."

Santiago poured himself more ouzo. "I think what gets abused is the principle."

"Is that all? Personification! The principle gets its feelings hurt?"

"However subtle or displaced the abuse, it still has a bad effect. It's the beginning of rationalization."

There it was. The reason for their continuing impasse was never far to seek. Dr. Santiago subscribed to ideas that could not help anyone live sensibly in the world. The principle, indeed. This casuistic creed for the bungled and the botched – his simple-minded herd-morality – was a weakness that might be exploited easily. What would Sun Tzu do with this high-minded lunacy? A frontal assault, what else. Facts were facts. Survival was the highest good – and, in the end, the only good. Nothing would change that. How could anyone not see?

Politely, Roz argued that golden rule ethics were impractical, that humans could not stand the strain of such idealism. Even assuming this principle was the basis of ethical behavior, what was the sense of having a standard that could not be met? It would lead only to frustration and unhappiness – as if there were not enough of this already in the world.

"Frustration and unhappiness? Well, perhaps," he allowed. "Unfortunately, we only truly act from principle when it hurts."

"That's masochism."

"Well, I suppose it can look like it – unless we love the principle."

"Love? How can anyone love... an abstraction?"

"Do you love critical theory?"

"You could say it's a passion. But it's not just theory. It's also practice."

"So's the principle."

Roz shook her head. There was no principle that could compel (much less impel) her assent. "May I ask a personal question? *How* do you manage to live in the world? This principle of yours is a liability. Absolutely."

Santiago put down his glass. As a riposte, he almost asked how *she* could possibly have the rashness to be a liability to others – but he did not. It would have been unfairly judgmental,

and he had no room to criticize in this regard. Perhaps he had finally learned something? Not many years before, he would have said something harsh, something hypocritical.

"Look," he began, "I fail the principle all the time. All my life I might have done better. Of course, I never faced that. Until one day, not so long ago, I ran out of nonsense – the dog and pony show of rationalizations – when I became aware of a paradox. *My principle*, as you call it, exists. It exists so long as there remains but one person to affirm its existence. We may deny its existence. We may mount an argument to the contrary. But then, why should we get annoyed when someone jumps queue at the post office? What I mean is, if the principle does not exist, ultimately nothing remains but expediency and the sort of disembodied argument one encounters in an ethics class, where there is no basis for any real ethos. Besides, to tell you the truth, in denying the principle, I think one admits its existence – because there must be something to deny. Here, of course, we can go round and round. Right? Well, I am proposing a paradox of the kind you seem to enjoy. Human reality is structured, right? I know – who wants to suppose, much less argue, that such an ontology is *the* paradox of being human? Besides, the principle cramps our style. It's inconvenient, because we can't always get what we want and then feel good about it. But the principle is rational. You see, my dear Rosalva, unlike rationalization, rationality costs something."

Rational? What to do with this? Something about it was seventeenth century. Worse, the delivery was nineteenth!

Roz now understood how the gray eminence must view her. She knew what he was thinking. He never did say – could not say, though surely he wanted to ask – how could anyone have the temerity to be a liability to others? Surely he would ask whether she was so different in such matters? Had she only an aridly critical intellect and never the winning reproachfulness of a hurt-heart woman? Must it all end in antagonism of sex to sex, without any counterpoising predilections? Something like that in tone; surely it was something late-Victorian.

His questions would be framed thus: Was it that she was, perforce, more callous and less romantic – or did she think that her insensitivity was really heroic? (This latter bit was arguably more sustainable.) Was she so perverse that she willfully gave others pain for the vain luxury of implementing theory – that is, *practice* – all the while remaining extravagantly untouched by authentic fellow-feeling, to say nothing of empathy? Or, what genuine excellence appertained to such as her character (essentially large-minded upon a moment's reflection) despite the previous exercise of those narrowly feminine humours on impulse that so oft appear to give women their sex? Surely her thought as now constituted had, of necessity, taken that direction imparted to it by a disinterested *Nature*; hence, a burning indignation against that which renders, in every other relation of life, an aspect of irrecusable selfishness. In his final muddled analysis, she would have acted with unusual foolishness, a colossal inconsistency more than equal to any of (why not) Miss Sue Bridehead. And how had she proceeded? – by plunging bravely into she knew not what for the sake of asserting her heady independence in deconstructive retaliation for the long train of abuses originating with the privileging of *logos* in one of Plato's texts! Well, same (*ipse dixit*) to you, Herr Professor Doktor! That was it, wasn't it? But the gray eminence, being such a proper 19th century gentleman, could not bring himself to say it (*ipissima verba*, anyway).

By now, Roz had nearly lost containment of her annoyance when Dr. Santiago's voice became suddenly and forthrightly confessional in tone. She was flummoxed, but listening. It was come-to-Jesus time.

He said that he had been married three times (surely with none consummated, thought Roz) and divorced three times. The object of the first marriage was consolidation of social position, on both sides of the aisle. In such arrangements, men were expected to have outside interests – as were women, for that matter. The only consideration was discretion. Arrangements were made to the satisfaction of the parties, and no one got hurt – though in some cases children were affected. So it happened that the real love of his life came during his second marriage. An affair with a neighbor's maid produced an 'illegitimate' child, stillborn. This was years ago, but he continued to carry it, the aftermath had been so painful. *He* was abandoned. The mother of his stillborn child vanished, without ever fingering him as the father – yet anguish brought the second marriage to an end, when he could no longer hide his feelings from his wife. Then his stepdaughter, after the divorce, turned to alcohol, pills, and a string of abusive boyfriends until she ended up in rehabilitation. But the real comedy of error occurred when he tried to fill the hole with a third marriage to a woman who cared for him deeply, flaws and all, but he could not reciprocate. This, too, was actually a marriage of convenience, and it ended miserably. Was it his fault? He could rationalize that he had stopped having affairs. Nevertheless, being in love still with the maid, he was emotionally unavailable. He wrapped himself in his work until, one day, she jumped in front of a bus. Fortunately, her right leg was fractured only. After that, he began to look at himself – too late, however, to save the marriage. Acquaintances had since told him that this once vital woman now lived a reclusive existence.

"Why, do you suppose, does she do that?" asked Santiago. "How should we describe my behavior? I was in Europe then. Such deportment was accepted behavior among – if you will – people of my class. Should we think of my history in terms of serial polygamy or compensation for feelings of inferiority – or was it an exercise in utter selfishness? What suggests itself?"

"Perhaps you should never have married at all." Not too abruptly, Roz distanced herself from Santiago's implication by changing the subject: "You know, Dr. Ropoliz believes nothing has been lost; every word that was ever spoken is out there, somewhere, floating in the air." She had intentionally implied something to be inferred, something like accountability, without saying she subscribed to the notion. She was sure he would take the bait. Instead, he said:

"Interesting. Is Dr. Ropoliz a religious man?"

"A spiritual person, you mean?" corrected Roz.

"Spiritual, then."

"He may approve one or two Hindu deities."

"Mm."

Come rush hour, Dr. Caribe y Sila escaped the professor's office, departed the graduate school, and took leave of the university. Relieved, soon she would break away from the SoBart, the city, and the state.

That evening, Rosalva decided to celebrate. It was her birthday, after all, the Big Three-Oh, and she had decided upon a new singles bar downtown. She treated herself to a taxi.

It was happy hour. Sitting at the corner of the bar, she ordered vodka on the rocks. Then she made eye contact with an attractive looking guy seated in the shadows. He smiled, collected his glass, and sauntered over to sit down beside her.

"Don't I know you?" he said in a pleasantly sonorous voice.

Rosalva smiled, "You'll have to do better than that."

"No, seriously. From the big house by the lake. There was a party."

Rosalva's eyebrows climbed her forehead. "You were there?"

"Sure. Mind if I smoke?"

That's how it started. What a very small world it turned out to be, and what an interesting man. He presented his card, emblazoned *QED* in gold on creme. Of course, Mr. Dunraven had a telex number and a mobile phone. He was in the trade editorial department in the London office of Ark Press, knew quite a little about the proposed annotated edition, and had also been in the music room with a group of partygoers who had come to see the mural. He exhaled a long trail of smoke.

The music came up. Or perhaps she had only now noticed it. It was a song popular two or three years back, one Robert had played over and again while writing the sonnet he presented her. She had disliked the parched vocal then, and the words were an annoyance now:

*She's precocious and ferocious
She knows how to make a pro blush
All the boys think she's a spy*

"Well, there's so much to talk about," said Rosalva brightly, yet intimately. She finished her glass. Then she reached over, smoothly, removed the cigarette between his lips, and placed it between her own.

"Would you care for another?" he asked.

Chapter 21

It was a new day, a day for cycles. From the overlook of her bedroom window, Rosalva saw the matted brown lawn of City Park flecked with sap green and cinnabar. Canadian geese, again heading north, were flocked around the rim of a shallow wading pond. Stout robins were yanking elastic worms from the moist soil.

The air was warm. At the ends of slender branches were tender buds, and crocuses were pushing up from the manure-black bed encircling a fire hydrant.

She was well pleased. The earth was in rebirth.

The late morning mail included two letters with logos. The first, from *Outre Other*, she read over coffee. It was such timely good news. A forthcoming anthology, published jointly with the Oxford University Press, would include her essay on the use of chloroform in Victorian marriage beds. The second letter, from Ark Press, was concerned with a rather different draft of the work in progress.

What a lark, but hey – *who makes it happen?*

She sauntered into the bathroom. The silk kimono slipped from her shoulders and fell to the floor. Standing before the mirror, she removed the glassine wrapper from a fresh-scented lavender bar of Magill's No-frills Soap de Bain.

Then, she considered her reflection.

She was thirty now. It was time for hard self-assessment. It was time to reflect on her accomplishments.

She was a specimen. Her body-fat was seven percent, her teeth were sparkingly even, her raven tresses were enviously manageable, her hazel eyes were brightly clear. She had not the hint of a crow's foot, she was hardly needful of implants, her derriere was a firm peach, and her legs were long and lovely. Her health was perfect. She was again watching her diet (no more meat or dairy products) and practicing yoga. Only this morning, she had stopped smoking, cold turkey. She was self-actualized and focused. More, she was a doctor of cultural studies, with an appointment to teach at a prestigious school. And, she was being published by the Oxford Press. She almost wanted to sing. 'Everything's coming up...' life-affirmative and positive!

Who is Rosalva? What is she? Maybe that silly sonnet of Robert's got it right long ago. Yes! She had come through – meeting every challenge, negotiating every turn, weathering every storm – until, in the end, she had survived. No, *really* she had prevailed. *Successfully* prevailed. Oh, why be falsely modest? She had triumphed. All things considered, it was not such a stretch to say she had triumphed! She had come through *all of it*, smelling like a rose.

Chapter 21 Redux

This is not the second of three endings, after *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. It is only evidence of the inability of the author to make up his mind. So, admitting this is not a *recurso* for the wake of Finnegans, we begin again:

It was a new day, a day of *recurso*. From the overlook of her bedroom window, Rosalva saw the matted brown lawn of City Park flecked with sap green and cinnabar. Canadian geese, again heading north, were flocked about the marge of a shallow wading pond. Stout robins were yanking hapless worms from the moist soil.

The air was warm. At the ends of slender branches were tender buds, and crocuses were pushing up from the manure-black bed encircling a fire hydrant.

The Arcadian earth was in rebirth. She was well pleased.

The late morning mail included two letters with logos. The first, from *Outre Other*, she read over coffee. It was such timely good news. A forthcoming anthology, published jointly with the Oxford University Press, would include her essay on the use of chloroform in Victorian marriage beds. The second letter, from Ark Press, was concerned with a variant text of *Work in Progress*.

What a lark – but hey, who makes it happen?

She sauntered into the bathroom. The kimono slipped from her silken shoulders and fell to the floor. She removed the lavender-scented glassine wrapper from a fresh cake of Magill's No-frills Soap de Bain.

Then, before the mirror, she considered her reflection.

She was thirty now. It was time for hard self-assessment. It was time to reflect on her many accomplishments.

She was a specimen. Her body-fat was six percent, her teeth were even and sparkling, her raven tresses were enviously manageable, her hazel eyes were brightly clear. She had not the hint of a crow's foot, she was hardly needful of implants, her derriere was a peach, and her long legs were lovely. Her health was perfect. She ate no meat. She practiced yoga. She was self-actualized and focused. More, she was a doctor of cultural studies who taught at a prestigious school. She was an author, renowned and respected. Everything about her life was affirmative. Who would not wish to sing?

Who is Rosalva? What is she? Maybe that silly sonnet of Robert's had it right, oh, so long ago.

What sonnet? The reader will please recall...

Chapter 1

For our heroine, at the time we are concerned to take up her story, the situation was yet again reminiscent of Robert. In fact, one might be justifiably disposed to say it was Robert all over – a stout fellow and nice guy, but a premature ejaculator. The reader may be informed to know that the gentleman here remarked (not by allusion but by direct reference) had begun to entertain the insupportable notion that, paired, they might proceed well indeed as "Rob & Roz," comfortably ensconced in a loft downtown, with poetry nights among a simpatico circle of close-readers, seasonal greetings to friends and associates, two-point-five offspring, and a fish bowl. It came as no surprise then, I say, that he had resigned immediately upon being subjected to a display of the temerity requisite to the forthrightly willful jilting of a lover who has become the proximate cause of vague numbness in the extremities. Of course, from the coign of vantage of the object of his affection, the gentleman dispensed with had not at all seen her in the round, although he had written what we may confidently affirm to be among the strangest of sonnets – a piece of puffery presented at the termination of their sad intercourse, and beginning rhetorically, yet succinctly, *Who is Rosalva? What is she?*

... if only Mr. Henry James had told the story. Wait for it:

The End

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